

12th Sunday After Pentecost
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I AM The Bread of Life

By Lou Poulain, LLP

Did you catch the news story that appeared Friday, that the organizing committee for the Paris Olympic Games has apologized again for what they called “an inadvertent parody of the Last Supper.” If you watched the opening ceremonies a couple of weeks ago, you might remember a tableau scene across one of the bridges. A large group, arrayed across the bridge at a long table, reminiscent of Da Vinci’s painting the Last Supper. The characters seemed odd and wildly eccentric. There was quite an uproar! Almost immediately, the French Conference of Catholic Bishops slammed the Olympics for a “mockery and derision of Christianity.” Louisiana Republican Congressman and Speaker of the House Mike Johnson decried the performance as “shocking and insulting to Christian people around the world.”

Unfortunately, they got it wrong. The tableau scene was indeed inspired by a painting. But it was not Da Vinci’s. It was 18th century Dutch painter Jan van Biller’s work, “The Feast of the Gods.” The central character was Dionysos, the Greek god of wine and fertility!.

You might wonder, as I did, where this overwhelming touchiness, even defensiveness comes from. Let me say, that reaction isn’t novel.

If you haven’t already, please glance at the cover art on today’s bulletin. You see that the painting is entitled “Christ at the House of Levi.” You might wonder, who is Levi, and why is Christ at his house? The image represents a story that is found in the Gospel of Mark, when the tax collector named Levi gave a dinner party, and invited Jesus. In the Gospel account, the pharisees take offense that Jesus is sharing table with “tax collectors and sinners.”

Now, look again at the painting. Can you see some similarities with Da Vinci’s “Last Supper”? If you said “yes” you get maximum points, because “Christ at the House of Levi” was not the original name of the painting. The story of why is interesting.

In the early 1570’s, Italian painter Paulo Veronese was commissioned to paint the Lord’s Supper to be mounted in the dining hall of a monastery in Venice. Veronese’s work differed from Da Vinci in that the artist included in the foreground a number of witnesses to the holy meal, which takes place at a long table in the background. These observers represented the vast array of citizens; all sorts of people. Then the censors of the Venetian Inquisition had a look. They were shocked that this holy scene would be crowded with “buffoons, drunken Germans, dwarfs and other such scurrilities.”

The author defended himself by stating that he had needed to fill a 42 foot wide canvas, and that Christ and disciples *were safely separated* from the unseemly

onlookers within a central arch. The Inquisitors were having none of it. They maintained that the scene was disorderly, and irreverent. The artist was given 3 months to change the painting.

After some agonized reflection, Veronese refused. Instead, he renamed his painting, "Christ at the House of Levi." And suddenly, once the scene was less "sacred," the Venetian Office of the Holy Inquisition was satisfied, and closed the case. I am sure that Paolo Veronese exhaled a great sigh of relief!

And this is where I would like to begin today's reflection. It seems to me that the characters what inhabited the periphery of the scene triggered a deeply felt need by some to defend something they hold as sacred from from what? From the secular? From the profane? From the sinners and tax collectors? From us?

And that leads me to another question ... or actually many questions: Why do we tend to separate the sacred from the non-sacred? What is that protective impulse trying to preserve? And perhaps more importantly, it that somehow a symptom that we might be missing the point of it all to begin with?

Throughout the history of the Church, there has been a tendency to sharply delineate the "sacred" from the "profane." This is most clearly evident in the evolution of the sacramental ritual of the Holy Communion, from a the beginning, when the commemoration took place in the context of a communal meal, into a separate event that over time lost its character as shared communal meal to take on the nature of symbolic sacrifice. In other words, from "shared table" to "priestly altar."

There developed rules and rubrics to preserve the sacredness, and the separateness of the ritual. Strict eucharistic fasts were imposed on laypeople, and the object of the celebration evolved from a loaf of baked bread to individual, odorless and virtually tasteless white wafers. A wag once observed, "It might take greater faith to believe that the communion wafer is actual bread than to believe that it is transformed into Christ's Body!"

The eventual outcome of these changes is that over time, the practice of laypeople receiving communion at all fell away and it became the norm in the western church that only the priest communicated at most Masses. This problem was a major driver in the Protestant Reformation.

All of what I talked about are symptomatic of the impulse to separate, insulate and even silo the "sacred" from the human experience. The danger in this is that we can operate as if our experience of The Holy is entirely other from all the rest of our experience, rather than the expectation that The Holy meets us precisely in the every-day.

Jesus' richly layered metaphors, of course, draw our minds to Eucharist, but let's probe what Jesus means beyond that sacramental allusion when he says, "I am the bread of life."

There is, embedded in the segment of the Gospel we heard this morning, a remarkable intensity, a powerful, insistent proclamation by Jesus of his actual origin and deepest intent. Hear it again:

I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me will never be driven away; FOR I HAVE COME DOWN FROM HEAVEN, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that ALL who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.

No wonder the listeners began to complain about him! Knowing they cannot comprehend what he is saying, he reiterates, bringing us into the very depth of the metaphor:

I AM the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh!

Is Jesus being hyperbolic, exaggerating for emphasis? Was Jesus merely wrong in his beliefs that those who eat would never die? Or is Jesus saying something very different indeed about what it means to be really, fully alive?

In scripture, we find two great metaphors for intimacy and union: First, the sexual act. "... and the two shall become one flesh." And the second is the act of eating in community. In the earliest era of the church, the communities gathered around meals, during which they ritually reenacted and commemorated Jesus' Last Supper. And the principal sign — the sacramental sign, was the breaking and sharing of bread in fellowship. Com-union.

That much is clear. But what about that bit about living for ever? In the Gospel According to John, Jesus uses the phrase "Kingdom of God" only one time. But where the other Gospels use "Kingdom of God", Jesus in John's Gospel uses the phrase "eternal life." Jesus also uses, as a synonym, the words "Abundant Life." He says, "I have come that [you] might have life, and have it abundantly." (Jn 10:10). Abundant Life, the fullness of life. I think this is what Jesus' metaphoric language is actually saying: "Whoever eats of this bread will have their deepest hunger satisfied!"

Last week, Pastor Salying talked about Jesus as the fulfillment of our most basic human needs. She talked about how what Jesus offers turns Abraham Maslow's triangle, or pyramid, usually called "The hierarchy of human needs" upside down. I want to revisit that very interesting comment.

If you are not familiar with psychologist Abraham Maslow's reflection on the layers of human motivation, here is a quick thumbnail: Think of all the things that drive human behavior. What motivates us? And why? Maslow recognized that there are different layers of motivation, but there are very basic survival needs that must be met before humans can respond to "higher" levels of need. He represented his thoughts about this as a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid of needs is the fundamental need for security, followed by sustenance. Maslow's theory is that motivations aimed at "higher needs", such as social fulfillment, meaningful employment, etc. cannot succeed if the fundamental needs for security and sustenance are not first satisfied. Maslow said it succinctly. Here is a quote from a book he wrote in 1943:

"It is quite true that man lives by bread alone — when there is no bread. But what happens to man's desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled?

At once other (and "higher") needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still "higher") needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency"
(Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation" 1943, p. 375)

What Jesus offers is more fundamental than those basics. The fundamental need that Jesus meets is *relationship with the Holy*, a level of union with God, and through that core relationship, union with one other. In that union we find the fullness of our humanity; through abundance, the fullness of life, a life anchored in the Eternity of God.

Implied in Jesus' teaching here is the demand that God, through Jesus, places on us. Jesus offers us the bread of life. It is up to us to accept the offer and EAT... consume, fill ourselves the fullness of God's eternal life. And then live that life in imitation of Jesus, who fills us up with this gift. If we dare to live into that "eternal life" and imitate Christ, we will find that the distinction between the Holy; the Sacred and the so-called "Secular" or "Profane" begins to fade as we come to know deeply, in our very bones, that God met us in the real humanity of Jesus, and continues to meet us in our own humanity and that of all our neighbors. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians knew this, and in the reading we heard this morning encouraged that community, and us, to live in imitation of Christ:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger
and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to
one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ

has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

The Inquisitors of Venice failed to see, in Paolo Veronese's brilliant "Last Supper" that Jesus and his disciples at the central table were there for ALL the figures inhabiting the picture, even the "buffoons, drunken Germans and dwarfs." Jesus offer of abundant life is, was and always will be for everybody, and the efforts of those who would police artistic expression does nothing to "protect" Jesus, nor his beloved community of fallible, imperfect human beings.

So I close this reflection with a suggestion that Margo made to me as we discussed ideas for this sermon. She connected this reading with the Lord's Prayer, as we pray that God will give us, this day, our daily bread. I have resolved that this week, when I pray that prayer, I hold the intention to pray for The Bread of Life, and the abundance of life that Jesus offers us in himself. And I will strive to embrace that gift and live as fully and completely as possible. I invite you to share in that resolution.

Amen.