

Proper 14, Pentecost X August 9, 2009

I want to begin today with a familiar verse from Deuteronomy—it's not in the readings, but it lies behind this whole series we've been hearing from John's Gospel. (It also shows up in the temptations stories in Matthew and Luke.) Moses is giving the Law to Israel and (among many other things) Moses says to the people that God "...humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." We know this verse, especially the punch line, very well. But the more I think about the logic of these words, the more interesting it becomes.

How would you do it; how would you teach someone that we do not live by bread alone? What would you give someone to make them understand this? My first thought would probably be to give them a sermon, or a lecture, or to try to arrange a spiritual experience. Or maybe to have a really spiffy adult education class, with professional videos and worksheets and breaking into small groups to go over some discussion questions—maybe that would do it. How about it? What would you give someone so they could understand that we do not live by bread alone?

What God gave the people in the wilderness, and what Jesus gave the crowd in John's Gospel, was bread. Manna was bread, or enough like bread to make no real difference. They ate it and it kept them alive. They couldn't live without it. But isn't that peculiar? Why give bread to make people understand that they do not live by bread alone? Of all the things to give, why give the one thing that seems to prove that you **can** live by bread alone—namely bread?

And yet I suspect that this was the most important part of the whole business of Israel's being in the wilderness, of their being formed as the people of God. I suspect Jesus saw this as vitally important to his mission.

Because if the folks couldn't get this, if they couldn't figure out what was going on with the manna, or with the miraculous feeding, if they couldn't understand about the loaves, well, then, it was all pretty much hopeless.

The key to all of this is that God gave Israel, and Jesus gave that crowd, bread in such a way that it was obvious that the bread was pure gift. They didn't make it, they didn't work for it, they couldn't pay for it—it was just there. So they had the chance to look at bread, at the stuff of life, with clarity; and to see beyond that thing, and to see that this vital stuff was also and centrally a gift from God and so a sign of God's love and of God's call to relationship with him. Since it was so clearly a gift, they were able to see that the thing (the bread) meant more than what it was all by itself. (All real gifts do).

But if the manna, if the bread on the hillside, if the stuff that God give us so that we can live, if this is given us, not just to keep us alive, but also to draw us to God and to life with God, then we do not, and we cannot, live by bread alone. So, oddly, the only gift that can really show us that we do not live by bread alone is free bread. Anything less vital, anything less essential, would allow us to cling to life for its own sake, and so make all questions of meaning secondary, and avoidable. This is still going on, and even, now God gives us life, and the stuff of life, not because life is the most important thing in the world for us, but just exactly because it is not—we are given these as gifts, to help us realize that God, and life with God, are most important.

We see this with special clarity at the Altar, where the bread we receive is clearly not about itself alone; but is hooked to something much greater. || So we can look with awe and reverence upon something as simple as this thin, tasteless wafer, because we know it to be sign, symbol and presence of something much greater than flour and water.

But the deepest sign, symbol and presence of something much greater is not just this bread—it is everything we have.

Part of the point of this bread, the bread of the Eucharist, is to teach us that we do not live by bread alone. This bread is special so that we can understand that all bread, all that we have, all that is necessary for life, that this, too, is special. It is all given us as a sign, symbol, and occasion of God's love. It's here to draw us past itself and past ourselves, so that we, seeing both the gift and the giver, will respond to the giver in love and in service. Creation, all of creation, is sacramental in this sense.

So it all gets jumbled up: the bread we eat every day, and Israel's manna in the wilderness, and Jesus being the bread of life, and our weekly Eucharist—they all run together.

Here is one way into this. There's an old rabbinic admonition that insists, of anything and everything, "if you don't give thanks for it, it's bad for you." The food you eat, the clothes you wear, the air you breathe, the people and the things of your life, if you don't give thanks for it, it's bad for you.

So, if you have enough to eat, and the strength to go on for another day, and people who care about you, if you have all of that and you don't give thanks for it—then it's bad for you, all of it.

It's poisoning your soul, and shrinking your life. Really.

That's because giving thanks for something puts it in its proper place, it places the thing as part of our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. That's where things, all things, properly belong. Any thing, especially bread, is understood properly only when it is understood in relationship to God.

On the other hand, if we do give thanks for it, then it can be good for us. If we give thanks for it, then every part of our lives can draw us beyond itself and toward the only source of meaning and hope that makes any sense.

It's very easy to forget this. It's very easy to value the things of creation and of our lives for themselves—to take them outside the context of a relationship with God. When we do this, when we see only what is right in front of us and no more, then we are impoverished, we are barely living on the surface of our lives and of our world.

That's what it means to live by bread alone. To live by bread alone means to see no farther than the things themselves, and so to miss the presence and the love and the call of God that are really a part of every piece of bread we have. It's to miss the gift, and the love behind the gift.

So God gave Israel bread, and Jesus gave the crowds on that mountainside bread, and God gives us bread—God gives us all we need for life—so that we may be drawn beyond all of these and see more than we would see otherwise—so that we might understand that we do not live by bread alone. This means a whole lot of things, but the first thing it means is that, if you don't give thanks for something, then it's bad for you.