

**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church**  
**The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson**  
**Proper 14 Year B**

As Mother Carenda pointed out a few weeks ago, we spend five whole weeks unwrapping this one chapter in the gospel of John. For almost 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the year, we are exploring the "I am the bread of life" statement Jesus makes to those gathered around him. So we have to imagine, that each week, we are to add yet one other piece to our comprehension of the meaning of Jesus. It's almost as though we need all the various puzzle pieces to be turned over and put into place, for us to begin to see the larger picture. Now for any of us who have studied the scriptures intentionally, we know that rather than a passage being a 2 dimensional puzzle piece, it may be more accurate to describe each passage as a prism, with many places where light can shine through, can catch our attention, and reflect the truth and beauty beyond. But however we envision our passage this morning, as a puzzle piece fitting together, or as one facet to an intricate prism, let's look for the particular and unique truth added in our discourse this morning.

The part in our passage today that is perplexing and concerning to the Jews is the fact that Jesus is identifying himself as the giver of divine life. They are still stuck in looking to understand Jesus from a literal, tangible, and physical perspective, not comprehending how Jesus could come down from heaven when they knew his biological parents. And in the gospel of John, we don't have a birth narrative at all, certainly not one which includes a virgin birth component, we have a prologue that sets Jesus as part of the Word which spoke creation into being and then became incarnate in the person of Jesus. Upon the questions asked by the Jews, the gospel writer really could have made this all a lot easier for us and could have taken the opportunity to lay out some good Christian doctrine for us to attach to, but rather kept the conversation focused on what Jesus was offering to the world.

Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus is that which gives life, true life, eternal life, life that sustains and nourishes our souls so we may experience the kingdom here and now, and so that we may be raised up with him on the very last day.

Now I don't know what eternal life or salvation means to you, and I'd love to know. Let's have that conversation sometime. It may mean something different to each one of us; and our experiences of the eternal here and now may be even more varied, while each one of them true.

But the best way I can talk about what I believe Jesus is really getting at, the transformation which is possible through our encounter with the holy, with something that is alive and real and life-changing, is to retell a moment made holy by the living presence of Christ, a moment many of us shared.

It was just over four months ago, and I've never seen the church fuller. In fact, there were people participating in the service seated in the overflow area in the Episcopal Home. We had gathered to find a way and a place to put our tears and our grief into the living body of Christ, to find solace and comfort, and to give back to God that which God has generously shared with us, the life and ministry of Deacon Janice. Our burial liturgy is strong and has the capacity to hold all emotions and ultimately bring us to the point when we can shout at the grave, alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.

The moment of transformation for me was when I was distributing bread to those who knelt at the altar rail and we were singing the hymn, "I am the bread of life", and when we got to the refrain, "And I will raise them up, and I will raise them up, and I will raise them up on the very last day", the bread that I had received and was now distributing became the bread of life. New life. Renewed life. Suddenly my heart lifted, the weightiness, which had been grief, was somehow released, there was joy in my voice, and there was hope in soul, for something happened. I knew that we collectively had been drawn into a place of eternity. I felt clearly through our singing we were lifting Janice's soul into the arms of Christ and ours were lifted there too.

This is the eternal life Jesus is offering us in the gospel today: the chance for the goodness of one life to somehow to make a remarkable and life-giving change in lives of many. This is the good news of Christ, that there is an eternity that we can meet through the holy and can choose to live out of.

Now some of you didn't share this particular holy moment with us. Some of you didn't even know Janice. This "bread of life experience" is by no means limited to an extraordinary moment at a funeral. But is available to each of us in many ways and in all times. These "bread-of-life experiences" can come when a sense of peace settles over our previously chaotic souls, or in times of intimacy, or in times of clarity or insight, or inspiration, or desire, or creativity. New life, renewed life is born.

These experiences can be in times when something beyond our imagination meets our deepest needs. It can be in something as simple and familiar as a smile, or in something as complex as the grand mystery of God, showing up in the wafer placed upon your hand.

Often these moments come unbidden, and we can choose to be skeptical as the people in the gospel were today, basically saying, I don't get it, I don't trust it, and I don't like it. Or we can be like the disciples in last week's passage when they moved into a place of desperation, of wanting God to deliver their bread each and every morning, without doing the hard spiritual work of finding within them, a changed and open heart. Or we can be like Peter, James, and John, who found themselves on a mountain top with Jesus in our reading this past Thursday for the Feast of the Transfiguration, when Peter wanted to build tents to contain the ever-living presence of the Messiah.

None of that really works. If we respond with either a sense of scarcity, denial, desperation, distrust, or a desire to control our God, we are missing the most amazing gift offered to us – transformation into the body of Christ.

A practice in our meditation group is to open a small book by Joan Chittister, "Breath of the Soul: Reflections on Prayer" and read whatever short chapter the book happens to fall open to. It's amazing. As soon as anyone of us reads the title of the chapter, we all seem to collectively say, "oh yeah, that's exactly what I need to hear today." This past Thursday, I opened the book to the chapter on authenticity.

It began with a quote from C.S. Lewis, "The prayer preceding all prayers is, "May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to. "

The chapter goes on to speak about some of the false Gods we speak to, such as the positions we hold, or our social status, or our possessions, or even our religious practices, which in turn causes us to become inauthentic, so that we don't really know who we are, so that we stop growing spiritually, or cease questioning our motives, or fail to stretch beyond the comfortable spiritual conversations of another time and age. And part of the problem of that is that when we are not bringing an authentic self to the search for God, we cannot possibly find the real God.

Then Joan said something, which really stuck with me --

We confuse the God of Life with the simpler version – the God of the living.

Jesus tells us today that he is the Bread of Life, not to be confused with the simpler version – the Bread of the living – the earthly food that sustained the earthly lives of the Israelites, the bread that satisfied hunger, momentarily, and yet did not offer life eternal.

In our passage today, we have God in the flesh, Jesus our savior, standing before us, saying, I am your bread. Come feed on me. Let me meet your deepest need. Let me change your life forever.

As we manage a faithful response to this invitation, an interesting and amazing thing happens – we become the pieces of the puzzle which helps to form the larger and more complete picture of God; we become a facet of the prism, which light and beauty can be reflected from, and we set the light of Christ into the world.

Amen.