**August 16, 2015 The Rev. Carenda Baker**

**12th Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 15 (Yr. B)**

**John 6:51-58**

“WHAT ARE YOU HUNGRY FOR?” my mother would ask when she knew I was coming home for a visit. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe some ham, green beans, and potatoes. Or maybe that Swiss steak you make that is so tender, you hardly need a knife to cut it, and then it just melts in your mouth. But I do really like that chicken and creamed-corn casserole with the bread crumbs on top - a lot. And you know, I haven’t had liver and onions and fried potatoes in eons. Mom, I will never, ever get tired of your baked macaroni and cheese, browned lightly, just right, around the edges. You know - I’m not really sure what I’m hungry for”.

How about you? Did you come here looking for something in particular today? What are YOU hungry for?

This is the question underlying today’s gospel, and indeed all of John, chapter 6. It was first hinted at by the miracle of Jesus’ feeding the 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish. The people were excited. Dish it up for us, Jesus! They are eager to be fed always. Nobody wants to live in food insecurity. Each week we have been getting deeper and deeper into this truth that Jesus does not just give bread; Jesus IS the Bread - Living Bread come down from heaven. At first it may not sound like there is much different in today’s gospel from what we heard last week or the week before. But there is.

Up to this point in John 6, belief in Jesus as the bread from heaven is what will bring one eternal life. But in today’s passage, a new piece is added: a food and drink requirement. ***“Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”***

What in the world is this all about? The Greek word for “eat” in this passage suggests a graphic picture – it’s not just nibbling at appetizers politely. It’s not a quick microwave dinner of Lean Cuisine you can gulp down hurriedly. This eating involves chewing, even gnawing. Kind of like the gusto with which some of us dug into those barbecued ribs on Friday night. Chewing flesh.

And “drinking blood”? Jews were forbidden to drink the blood of anything. Blood is the source of life. It would have been disgusting and repugnant for Jesus’ hearers to even consider this. No wonder they ask, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” No wonder they argued amongst themselves, and eventually turned their confused murmuring against Jesus himself.

In John’s gospel, there is always more going on than the words literally suggest. There is more complexity, more rich and deep meaning underneath. John will not allow his community or his readers to just skim the surface and be content with first impressions.

It is not a modern dilemma to struggle with the connection between body and spirit. The early church grappled with how Jesus could be both human and divine. It was unheard of that a deity, a God would come to earth in human form. Some began to teach that Jesus’ humanity, his physicality was not all that important; the teaching were known as Docetism and Gnosticism. Some scholars believe this kind of controversy was present when the author of John’s gospel was writing for his community. For John’s community sharing Jesus’ body and blood in Communion - the Eucharist - was a primary way to emphasize and reinforce that in Jesus, the physical and spiritual are united. Eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood came to be a sacramental sign of faith in a real, bodily crucified Jesus. For the gospel writer John, Eucharistic practice is not optional in the community of faith but essential. The Eucharist is feeding on and being fed by Jesus. We will pray in today’s Prayer of Great Thanksgiving at the Eucharist, asking God “*that the whole Church may be made one body with Christ, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.”*

Jesus intends to have all of us – body, mind, heart and spirit. And that is exactly what we get from Jesus – all of him, his whole life. When we receive bread and cup, we are taking the essence of Jesus, the self-giving life of Jesus into ourselves. St. Augustine would hold up the bread and cup at the Eucharist and say: “See what you are. Become what you see.” Today we would say - We become what we eat – we become Christ’s body and blood – a real presence, with life-giving power.

As Anglicans we believe that one of the primary ways we think about God is through the lens of incarnational theology. Among the four gospels, John emphasizes the Incarnation the most strongly and directly, starting in the first chapter, where “the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us”, or as one translation says, “God pitched his tent among us”. Flesh and blood matters, in other words. The physical world is important. God comes to us in the physical, created stuff of life. The physical body is not meant to get split off from the spiritual part of us. The physical is not viewed as inferior and unnecessary. Body and spirit belong together according to John. God works through the created world to bring redemption. We affirm this in both the Apostles and the Nicene creeds by saying, “Jesus was crucified, suffered death and was buried.” In the words of John’s Jesus:*“The bread that I will give* ***for the life of the world*** *is my flesh.”*

But it is not only through Jesus’ death that we participate in the Eucharist. This feeding, this holy meal is more than just remembering. Our participation in the Eucharist means we participate fully in all of Jesus’ life and gifts NOW – his teaching, healing, reconciling, forgiving, and transforming resurrection work.

Benedictine sister Macrina Wiederkehr in her book, *A Tree Full of Angels – Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary* writes:

“Most of us are not nearly hungry enough for the things that really matter”. She says that the nourishing crumbs of the living Christ call out to us daily, asking us to allow him to bless and nourish us. Listen to a bit more of what she writes:

“I have been called to be divinized. My baptism loudly announces that call. There is no such thing as an ordinary Christian. My baptism calls me, in Christ, to be like God. If we want to become like God, we cannot eat the whole loaf at once. It was never meant to be like that. We start small. We remember our littleness, our great need for nourishment. We remember too, our call to greatness, our pure capacity for God. Yearning to be faithful to such a call, we reach out for every crumb in our path. We meet them face to face. We give them our real presence. We eat them.”

She then goes on to describe how these crumbs of daily life come to us. One way is through the recognition of our sin and weakness. She says: “There is nothing like felt inadequacy to help me depend solely on God. What is sin but not living up to your potential, not being all that God calls you to be? When you embrace the emptiness, God can begin to fill you. God has a plan for you. Sin is living according to your own plan. Sin is trying to fill up your own life rather than allowing God to fill you. Sin is being willing to stay where you are rather than go through the pain and joy of being in process. St. Basil the Great said: Sin is not using the power for good that God placed within you.”

Further on she writes: “Daily I am called to remember that if I am not fed I will die. Standing before God hungry, I suddenly know who I am. I am one who is poor, called to be rich in a way that the world does not understand. I am one who is empty, called to be filled with the fullness of God. I am one who is hungry, called to taste all the goodness that can be mine in Christ. Standing before God hungry helps me know deeply my own need. Most of us have to taste our need in a fierce sort of way before our hungers jar us into turning our lives over to God.”

So – WHAT ARE YOU HUNGRY FOR? The Lord’s table is for life: not merely to temporarily satisfy our hunger but to whet our appetites, to call us into ever deeper communion with Christ so that every day of our lives we might wake up longing to feast on the Bread of Life. Having feasted, then each of us is called to be bread for the world. Our lives are meant to nourish others with the life-giving power of Christ, whose body we are.

When I was a United Methodist pastor and would serve children the Communion bread, I would say to them: *“Take this because Jesus loves you. Eat it because you love him.”* In other words: THANK YOU, LORD. I LOVE YOU.

That really is the best response we can offer. We are strengthened here to go into the world and make our words and deeds show what our hearts know.

Eucharistic Prayer C in our Book of Common Prayer says it this way: “Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.” Yes!