

THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 15

August 16, 2009 B

I want to express my gratitude to Sara Miles for her insightful and inspiring memoir, Take This Bread. After reading the book, I sent a copy to my dear friend, brother and mentor, Father Michael Carnevale, a Franciscan priest who directs the St. Francis Breadline on West 31st Street NY (www.stfrancisnyc.org/breadlineforthepoor.htm). He, in turn, ordered about fifty copies to share with others, including companions who faithfully feed the hungry not as a form of outreach, but one of gratitude, 'acknowledging the amazing abundance we're fed with by God.'

John 6:51-58

All registered members of our parish family will be receiving a letter in the mail this week. It's from me, inviting everyone to our **Homecoming Sunday** two weeks from today. It's a unique Sunday to worship together at one service as members of Christ's household here at St. Paul's. Much of our celebration will be about food and drink and sharing together God's gift of hospitality. Our stewardship theme this fall is **Gracious Givers** - and our 10 am Eucharist, followed by lunch, fellowship and fun activities, is an opportunity for us to offer gracious hospitality to one another, our guests and all who wish to become part of our community of faith. All are welcome - and all our members will be personally contacted by members of our stewardship ministry team to come and reconnect as a parish family as we prepare to start anew all of our Christian formation and education programs on the Sunday following Labor Day weekend. I encourage you to invite friends and family members, in particular, who might be searching for a new church home, to come and join in the celebration. It's a good Sunday for all of us to start anew!

It's not my style to start a sermon with a commercial, but after reviewing the Gospel readings for the past three weeks, our gospel today, and next week's gospel, all of which are from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, there's a strong connection between this sixth chapter of John's gospel and our Homecoming Sunday! The chapter started with the Feeding of the Five Thousand - and it seems to be John's intention to show that Jesus embodies God's generous hospitality. Unlike the stories of the account of the multiplication of loaves and fishes told in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus does not feed this crowd because they were hungry. Jesus feeds them simply because he is a gracious giver. The feeding of the five thousand opens the way for Jesus to explain the real significance of that miracle. We have in our gospel today the continuation of his teachings known as the "Bread Discourse." John wants the readers of the Fourth Gospel to know that Jesus is the Incarnate Word, the Son of God, who came into the world so that the world might have life, life in abundance. John gives us "a more spiritual and theological reflection on both the miracle and the person of Christ than one finds in the other Gospels" (Synthesis, Volume 22 No 8). Jesus shows us in word

and action who God is. And we see how, through the mysterious power of God at work in human hearts, some are drawn to Jesus as Lord while many are not. It's a mystery and a gift. How the Gospel of John ever became a litmus test for individuals and sectarian Christian communities who separate those who are 'saved' from those who are not, is hard for me to understand. For John writes in the language of metaphor and poetry, of signs and symbols, especially when it comes to the language about eating 'flesh' and drinking 'blood' in today's gospel. It was actually encouraging to me to discover in preparing this sermon that among Johannine scholars (the Biblical experts on John's gospel), this passage is among 'the most controversial and hotly debated verses in the Fourth Gospel' (The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX).

I was taught as a child that the sacramental bread and wine literally was transformed into the body and blood of Christ during a service of Holy Eucharist. I accepted this as one of the many mysteries of faith – and can vividly remember my first communion in second grade as a significant moment when the consecrated piece of bread, the body of Christ, was placed for the first time on my tongue. I was intrigued by the way the consecrated elements were treated with such deep respect and care. Back in those days, only a priest could touch the sacred elements, which were guarded like treasures to be shared only with those who approached the sacrament with pure hearts. Being part of a community of faith was important but somehow it couldn't hold a candle to the importance of the sacramental presence of Christ's body in the Eucharistic bread. It took time and experience and the tools of good theology for me to slowly focus what it means to taste and see the goodness of the Lord – and really ingest the reality of what Paul describes in the fourth chapter of Ephesians we heard two weeks ago: "There is but one body and one Spirit, just as there is but one hope given all of you by your call. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all, and works through all and is in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

WE are the BODY OF CHRIST. We are his flesh and blood in our world today. It is through our minds and hearts, our hands and our feet, our mouths and ears and eyes that Christ lives in us. St Augustine, in the early church, cut to the chase when he said, while holding the consecrated elements before the congregation: "Be what you see" (The Body of Christ). "Receive what you are" (The Body of Christ). We are the body of Christ in our world today. Look around at the people gathered here this morning in the flesh. Did you think while extending your hand in welcome, introducing yourself to someone you didn't know that you'd be welcoming the body of Christ in our assembly this morning? I know there may be a few among us not comfortable with the new practice we've started this summer before the 10:30 service, but it is very much connected to our sharing the one bread and cup of Jesus' life in our midst.

Be what you see. Receive what you are! It's much easier, perhaps, for some to see the body of Christ only in the sacramental elements than it is to see Christ in the flesh of others. "In this sacrament," St. Augustine wrote to new members of the church in a baptismal homily, "you are united with us – we are joined together, we drink together,

because we share life together” (JOHN Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Gerard Sloyan, p. 74).

At many of our Sunday services we send forth our Eucharistic Visitors to go and visit one or several of our parish family unable to be physically present with us during Sunday worship. It’s a way of concretely sharing God’s gracious hospitality with the sick and shut-ins unable to be with us in the ‘flesh.’ And often, in these moments of visitation, we who are sent forth with these holy gifts, become guests with those we visit at the banquet table of Jesus, the bread of life.

In her spiritual memoir called *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles, raised an atheist, tells of how she wandered into a church one Sunday, received communion and found herself transformed, embracing a faith she once scorned. “I still can’t explain my first communion. It made no sense,” she writes. “I was in tears and physically unbalanced: I felt as if I had just stepped off a curb or been knocked over, painlessly, from behind. The disconnect between what I thought was happening – I was eating a piece of bread; what I heard someone else say was happening – the piece of bread was the “body” of “Christ,” a patently untrue or at best metaphorical statement; and what I KNEW was happening – God, named “Christ” or “Jesus,” was real, and in my mouth – utterly short-circuited my ability to do anything but cry. All the way home, shocked, I scrambled for explanations. Maybe I was hypersuggestible, and being surrounded by believers had been enough to push me, momentarily, into accepting their superstitions: What I’d felt was a sort of contact high. Probably my tears were pent-up sadness, accumulated over a long, hard decade, and spilling out, unsurprisingly, because I was in a place where I could cry anonymously... Yet that impossible word, JESUS, lodged in me like a crumb. I said it over and over to myself, as if repetition would help me understand. I had no idea what it meant; I didn’t know what to do with it. But it was as real as the actual taste of the bread and the wine. And the word was indisputably in my body now, as if I’d swallowed a radioactive pellet that would outlive my own flesh.”

Before long, Sara turned the bread she ate at communion into tons of groceries, piled on the church’s altar to be given away. And within a few years, she and the people she served had started nearly a dozen food pantries in the poorest parts of their city. “Because of how I’ve been welcomed and fed in the Eucharist, I see starting a food pantry at church not as an act of ‘outreach’ but one of gratitude,” she writes in her memoir. To feed others means acknowledging our own hunger and at the same time acknowledging the amazing abundance we’re fed with by God.”

Sara Miles raises a question in her memoir which the sixth chapter of the gospel of John raises for me: “Now that you’ve taken the bread, what are you going to do?” It’s a question worth contemplating at our service of Holy Communion this morning, especially as we approach our homecoming Sunday and the start of our stewardship season: “Now that you’ve taken the bread, what are you going to do?”

God is indeed a gracious giver. And God, through Christ, sets the table for us each week, inviting us to join together in a celebration acknowledging with grateful hearts the amazing abundance we're fed with by God. Our *Homecoming Sunday* is a gift we are offering ALL our members and all newcomers who hunger for Jesus, the bread of life. I invite you, in his name, to come join the feast!

Amen.

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