

Pentecost X (Propers 14B) RCL
August 9, 2009

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

In her book, Make the Connection, Oprah Winfrey tells about the turning point in her life. Her weight was at an all-time high – 237 pounds – when she attended the Emmy Awards Show, having been nominated for best talk show host. As she tells it, she *prayed* for Phil Donahue to win so she wouldn't have to stand up, pull down her skirt, and waddle up to the stage with the whole world watching her "behind." Think of it! At the pinnacle of her career, all she could think of was how fat she was.

That was a dead giveaway, she says, that something else was going on besides physical hunger. She was young... she had fame, money, success, but (in her own words) she "couldn't fill up the emptiness inside."

Frederick Beuchner, Presbyterian minister and one of my favorite writers, says that gluttony is to go to the refrigerator to cure spiritual malnutrition.

One way or another most of us are spiritually malnourished; hungry for something, usually not for food -- although we might eat like there's no tomorrow, or try to fill up the emptiness with alcohol or work or gambling or sex or shopping, or just plain busyness. One way or another, most of us are starving and aren't quite sure for what.

To this hunger Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." That's a pretty amazing promise he's making.

It's important to note here the difference in the way we look at bread and how people in the first century saw it. Today, most of us buy our bread in the grocery store. The supply and the choices are practically limitless: white, wheat, rye, sourdough, pita, French... sliced, wrapped, and labeled, including fat and fiber content. We can freeze it in large quantities for convenience, or stop and buy it almost anytime, anywhere.

But to Jesus' listeners, the image of bread was something else altogether. Bread was literally the "stuff of life." It was entirely dependent on local supplies, which were subject to weather and other variables. It was perishable, and so was made daily, and was a staple of the diet, not just a side dish or sandwich pieces.

So for Jesus to say, "I am the bread of life," was to say (among other things): I am the substance and sustenance of your life. Then he went on to describe this bread as something that would feed them in such a way that they would never be desperate again, never empty on the inside again. This bread would feed their hearts and souls; will feed our hearts and souls.

So what happens when we receive that bread, this bread of life that Jesus offers us? What then? Is that it? Our souls are fed, our hearts are full? Is that why Jesus came... to make us feel better?

Well, yes, but I believe there is more to it than that. I believe that Jesus came to us, came to BE this living bread *not just to fill and comfort us*, but in order that our lives would be transformed and that the world might be changed through us.

And there is no better description of that transformed life than in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Listen to what we heard in just this short reading this morning:

- Put away falsehood;
- speak the truth;
- be angry but do not sin;
- let no evil come out of your mouth;
- put away bitterness, wrangling, and slander;
- be kind to one another – even tenderhearted; and
- FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER AS GOD IN CHRIST HAS FORGIVEN YOU.

When we have fed on the living bread, the bread of life that *is* Christ Jesus, those are the characteristics that take hold in us. And none of them is more important than forgiveness. Just as God has forgiven us, we are to live a life rooted in forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the hallmark of Christian living. Without it, we're just going through the motions. But please understand: I am not talking about cheap grace. True forgiveness is much more than a quick, "I forgive you." That can often be little more than the forced apology of a five-year-old who mumbles, "Sorry," but hardly knows what he is saying.

True forgiveness starts with an act of will, and then can take years of prayer and meditation, of internal struggle, before it becomes a matter of the heart. And that can work both ways: both forgiving and being forgiven.

We talk a lot in church about such things, don't we? About our life together in Christian community; about honesty and love and forgiveness. But such things are easier said than done.

The Rev. Sam Potaro is an Episcopal priest and a popular writer and speaker. About four years ago, he told this story at a lecture at The Parish of St. John the Baptist in Portland, Oregon. The setting of the story was a conference of several hundred Episcopal students, chaplains, faculty and friends who had come together during the week between Christmas and New Year at Estes Park, Colorado.

The content of the conference was stimulating and provocative, often challenging comfortable notions of truth and authority. Suffice it to say that the small group discussions were full of spirited debate.

Worship was rich and varied, but the tensions of so much diversity and intensity was evident both in the debates and in the high-spirited partying. (They were, after all, Episcopalians, and it was the holidays!) On New Year's Eve everyone gathered for a party lasting well into the morning hours.

Sometime in the pre-dawn hours, after a good number had finally retired, a dispute broke out over the selection of dance music. Tempers flared, a racial epithet was hurled, and physical blows followed. The police were called, and the whole thing was over shortly. But none of this was known to the vast number who had already turned in for the night.

The next morning, New Year's Day, word got around quickly. No one seemed to know exactly what had happened, but everyone knew something was wrong. Right after breakfast, they were all to gather for the final event: a closing Eucharist celebrating the new year, and the theme of the conference, which was "A Naming of Darkness, A Calling to Light."

Everything was in place as usual: musicians were ready; the table was set; the candles lit; but a heavy, foreboding silence hung over the room. Just as the entrance rite was to begin, the celebrant walked alone to the front of the room. He informed the assembly that in the early-morning hours, the life of the community had been fractured by verbal and physical violence.

He did not specify who or how; only that the community had been broken, and that the Eucharist would not be celebrated until they were reconciled. Then, very simply and deliberately, he extinguished the two candles on the altar and sat down in the presider's chair.

The silence was interminable. This was not the safe, predictable routine of worship. This was nerve wracking and heart wrenching.

After what seemed like an eternity, a young man rose to his feet. He identified himself as the person who, just a few hours earlier, had become angry and used a racial slur against a woman in the group. He asked her to stand if she would accept his apology. Across the room, she stood and offered her acceptance... and her forgiveness.

But it didn't end there. Slowly, others stood and one by one, confessed their contributions to the community's brokenness. One young man confessed that he had knowingly told a terrible anti-gay joke in the presence of those he knew to be homosexual. He asked forgiveness, and others stood to grant it.

On and on it went, like a living enactment of the Pauline catalogue of human sin, and the call to a life of forgiveness and reconciliation. Through the tears came a new vision of what it means to be church, and they knew they were in the presence of God, standing if only for a moment, in the mystery. The Eucharist that followed was more than a culmination; it was a commencement, a new beginning.

And that is what this Eucharist is meant to be: not only bread for our hungry hearts, but sustenance for a life transformed, nourishment for a life defined and shaped by forgiveness.

Come then to this table, trusting that whatever it is that you need to fill the emptiness in your heart and in your soul, God in Christ Jesus will feed you and fill you. And then be transformed – one day at a time, one moment at a time – “forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Amen.

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