

Sermon by Bob Sessions: The Bread of Life

Last week Kirk made several important observations that inform my sermon today. This week marks the sixth week on the sixth chapter on John's gospel, and there are many, many references to bread throughout. Why?

One reason this chapter is so important for the lectionary, and thus for the church, can be seen by contrasting it with the reading for today from Kings (which is not in our version of the lectionary). The Kings reading marks the culmination of centuries of the Jewish quest for collective identity, bringing the Covenant of the Ark to the temple. When they do so, the holy spirit fills the temple and the people pledge their fidelity to the God who, despite great odds and centuries of subjugation, has helped them become a free and independent people.

The passage from Joshua we read today reinforces the message that if the Jews are righteous God will favor them, reinforcing identity and nation building. Joshua's followers repeat the ancient pledge of fidelity to God. "We will be loyal to God as He is to us." Again, the focus of these passages from the Hebrew Bible is on obedience to the God of the Jews because of what he gives them. The Covenant of the Ark. The central source of their identity.

As you might suspect, the compilers of the lectionary believe that communion, eating consecrated bread and wine, is the Christian parallel to the Jewish covenant. How? And why does it take such repetition to make this parallel convincing?

A major clue as to why repetition is necessary can be found in the response of the crowds to Jesus's words in the story that precedes these passages. Jesus has just fed 5,000 people and then tried to get away a while for a little rest to kick back with his closest friends and regroup, but the crowds kept following him. He realizes they mainly want physical bread. But now that he's given them bread for their physical needs, how can he change the message to show them he wants to help meet their spiritual needs?

He tries by telling them he doesn't **provide** bread from heaven; rather, he **is** the bread of heaven. Remember he was born in Bethlehem, which means, "the house of bread." Jesus is using familiar physical things to help explain spiritual realities. But when they insisted upon stubbornly clinging to their misconceptions, Jesus goes on to say, "if you eat this bread from heaven you will not die because I am **living** bread so you can eat this bread and live forever. This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world."

You can hear their incredulity as they prepare to exit. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" What a horrific, cannibalistic idea! Jesus then adds fuel to the fire: "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." This flew in the face of all traditional doctrine! They had been taught in every generation since God gave the Levitical laws not to eat the blood of any animal. This likely absolutely repulsed them.

As we know, it took the crucifixion and resurrection before even his close followers figured out what he was talking about. So how are **we**, with the benefit of that

and much more history as our guide, to take the meaning of these physical metaphors about bread? And what does it mean to say this is our new covenant?

Bread is a powerful symbol for several reasons. Until humans figured out how to grow and preserve crops, and make bread, stationary towns and cities were impossible. Bread became the center of culinary and healthy life for the well being and growth of civilizations. (An aside for Kirk: beer was another major creation that brought the rise of sophisticated civilizations.)

So bread is a most powerful physical metaphor: without physical bread we, and our civilization, will wither; without spiritual bread our spiritual lives will likewise suffer.

So what is the “magic” of this symbolic bread? I believe that to focus on whether or not the bread and wine **are** Jesus’ body and blood (does transubstantiation occur?) is to ask the wrong question. Instead we should ask what occurs when we partake? Or maybe better, what **might** occur? Jesus’ strong suggestion is that if we follow him, if we eat the bread he offers in the spirit he offers it, our lives will be transformed.

A note on eating spiritual bread being the “new covenant.” The Covenant of the Ark was for the Jewish people. The Covenant of Bread is for anyone who hears the call and follows Jesus. I think it’s crucial, if communion is to work, that we view it as the same kind of event as when Solomon brought the Covenant into the temple and it was filled by the holy spirit. It happened once for them; it could happen every week for us.

How? How do we follow him and how will our lives be transformed (how will we be “born again”?) I think that a simple answer to the first question is most accurate: **to practice**. Practice prayer and meditation, and practice loving others as ourselves. By now I’m sure you all have tried some spiritual discipline, one of many forms of meditation including Centering Prayer. It’s not easy, is it? The changes that are promised are difficult, and typically come slowly and take years. They require the kind of chewing Kirk mentioned last week—deliberate, thoughtful and fully committed rather than a quick chew and swallow.

At the heart of such practice is *kenosis*, the Greek word for emptying oneself. To get to the point where we can follow Jesus we need to “die to the old self,” to give up aspects of our ego that keep us from being willing and able to love others as ourselves.

The answer to the question about how we might be transformed is best answered by looking at examples. One that stands out for me is the story about a Lithuanian woman who survived the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp in her country during the Second World War. When asked how she survived without going crazy or dying she said “I carried a bit of comb and a hunk of bread every day. The comb was for my hair; the bread was for whoever needed it.”

This woman was a Jew, probably very devout, because she embodied her faith in a most terrible situation. Her faith allowed her to keep her dignity, symbolized by the scrap of comb, in the most inhumane of conditions, and it shone through with her desire and willingness to give her bread (probably her daily ration!) to whomever needed it.

So my fervent hope for all of us is that as we prepare for and partake in eating Jesus' flesh and blood we will deepen our spiritual lives so that we might need less stuff and status to build and maintain our sense of worth and that we will be able freely to give of the bread of our lives to others. Amen