

Sermon for August 1, 2021
Proper 13
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a
Psalm 51:1-13
Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

When I was in seminary, a three-year stint at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, my wife and I called each other every day and did Morning Prayer together. Not long form but the daily devotions for individuals and families. It's on page 137 of the Prayer Book.
The opening prayer is from Psalm 51.

Open my lips, O Lord, *
And my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, *
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence *
and take not your holy Spirit from me.
Give me the joy of your saving help again *
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

We opened the day asking God to equip us for a day apart from each other to be consoled and strengthened with the divine presence. Not unlike those who sought out Jesus in today's Gospel. So - Rewind.

It's the day after the events of last Sunday – when Jesus fed the five thousand using the five barley loaves and two fish given by the little boy – Jesus has taken off with the disciples to get away from the crowd and crossed the Sea of Galilee to no avail. Somehow the crowd crosses the waters in I don't know how many boats and confronts Jesus.

“What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

I mean, it’s been a day since they ate their fill, and they’re hungry again. “Feed us!” they demand of him and his disciples.

Then Jesus said to them,

“Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

They said to him,

“Sir, give us this bread always.”

Jesus said to them,

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

At the entrance to the Parish office I’ve hung a cross. It’s not your usual wood or plastic. It’s a cross shaped from silverware.

You can see the tines of the salad fork entwined with the entre fork and a butter knife provides the cross piece. I bought the cross several years ago at diocesan convention in Albuquerque, where a group of homeless folks had a table to offer their crafts for sale.

This silver cross provides a visual expression of what Jesus is talking about – the Eucharist in which the body and blood of our Lord and Savior shed on the cross is made manifest with the implements of a meal in which we consume what we hunger and thirst for – the Eucharist - the food that feeds our souls.

Hunger and Thirst.

Food and Drink are among the basic needs of us all. If you look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs the basic needs of the body - food, air, sleep, sex – are the baseline. Next comes security: safety, employment, health. Then comes belonging: friendship, family, intimacy. On the fourth level we have esteem: confidence, achievement, respect. It's not until we've climbed the pyramid to meet those needs that we get to where Jesus is talking about: self-actualization: being Christ to the world.

We yearn for that top of the pyramid – to be at peace with ourselves. It is that spiritual hunger, that spiritual thirst, that Jesus promises to satisfy. The hungers of the world drive us away from that peace that the world seeks but that it cannot provide.

When I was seven years old and my cousin was six, we both came down with Polio. It was the summer before the Salk vaccine – the last summer of the epidemic that closed swimming pools, shut down parks and frightened parents out of their wits.

I remember that Saturday morning sitting in front of the television watching cartoons. Mom brought me breakfast and I tried to drink from a cup of tea and the tea just came out through my nose. My throat was paralyzed. Mom and Dad realized something was very wrong.

My father was a State Police Trooper, and he drove my mother and I with the siren screaming. Earlier that morning my cousin Greg had been driven by ambulance to Riley Children's Hospital in Indianapolis. As it turned out, I could not eat or drink; Greg could not breathe. He died.

I spent nearly two months hospitalized being fed liquids intravenously and later through a nasogastric tube.

I dreamed of eating. All my favorite foods would dance through my dreams. I was fed the nutrients my body needed, but it was not solid food by any stretch of the imagination.

But what my seven-year-old-self hungered for the most was my mother's touch.

During my hospitalization my mother was allowed to gown and mask up for one hour a day, and extend one little finger into my crib for me to grasp.

That need to touch and to be touched is essential for our human flourishing. When I served as a chaplain during CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education, at Presbyterian Hospital in Albuquerque, one of my rotations was in the NICU (neo-natal intensive care). The premies – premature babies – were cared for in special units. They were so small, so tiny, so delicate. The ones that thrived the most were those whose parents spent time reaching their gloved hands and touching their babies.

We all hunger to reach out to grasp the hand of the person we hold most dear. That is what Jesus is offering to those demanding to be fed. “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

This past Wednesday evening I stopped by Sherrill Hall to say “hi” to some members of the Chime Choir and to share a little pizza. The youngsters were saying goodbye to Valerie, who has led the Chime Choir for three years as a precious ministry to children and parents. Before they ate, Valerie led them in the grace they shared with each other whenever they broke bread together.

This grace speaks to what Jesus is telling those who hunger for more than something to fill their bellies. It goes like this:

Be present at our table, Lord

Be here and everywhere adored.

Bless these thy gifts, and grant that we

May feast in Paradise with Thee.

Amen.

Amen!