

Pentecost 13B. August 18, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14, Psalm 111, Ephesians 5:15-20, John 6:51-58.

The Gospel: John 6:51-58

[Jesus said,] ⁵¹“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³So Jesus said to them, “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. ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

The Sermon

Do you think ice cream could become “living bread from heaven”?

Three years ago this month, Taliban fighters were closing in on the capital city of Afghanistan. Kabul’s government employees would be the insurgents’ first targets. Khalis was a consultant for the Afghan Ministry of Finance. Knowing he and his family were in grave danger, they fled, eventually settling in the Washington, D.C. area. He was one of the lucky ones.

With the help of a non-profit loan program founded by a church-based refugee resettlement organization, Khalis was able to open a restaurant called My Kabul. Khalis realized that fellow refugees were still experiencing PTSD and depression and needed a place to gather and talk. He employs fellow refugees as cooks and servers of traditional Afghan food.

One day a woman came into the restaurant and saw the Afghan ice cream called “sheer-yakh”. She burst into tears and couldn’t stop crying. She felt like she was back home.

For her that day that ice cream became “living bread from heaven.” Everything she had held dear had been taken from her through injustice, hatred and violence. The small taste of kind comfort revived her spirit. ¹

When Jesus talked about being “living bread from heaven,” he said that he would give his life – his flesh and blood – for the life of the world. And he said whoever believed this HAS eternal life. Today already, not only after we die. Today we are raised up, alive!

The relief from deep sadness brought by the woman’s Afghan ice cream is part of being alive. The joy we find in one another, in our community, in our families, in our work – these moments are also part of eternal life. Eternal life is when God’s will is done – “on earth as it is in heaven.” Eternal life is when our deepest needs are met.

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A little fish heard people talking about how important water is to life. He didn’t understand, and, worrying, he asked a bigger fish how he could find this water that sustained life. The old fish smiled and said, just relax and enjoy it, because you are swimming in it. It’s all around you.

So with the grace of God. All around us. Mysteriously present. At home, at work, at school, here at church, at worship and in our coffee hour conversations. Even at memorial services where we meet the heartbreak of death. We can go about living eternal life today, yes: sharing the sorrow over deaths in our midst but knowing that death has been overcome so that we might have life.

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If you think about the biology of eating and drinking, you realize that what you receive by mouth – or feeding tube or intravenous line – becomes part of each cell of your body.

¹ Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, CEO of Global Refuge, formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, in a letter dated August 2024.

As Christ feeds us his body and blood, the Spirit begins – cell by cell – thought by thought – word by word – deed by deed – person by person – to conform our lives to Christ’s life and to build here a community known as the Body of Christ.

In this intimacy with Jesus, we find ultimate meaning for our lives. We do not have to work for the bread which perishes. We have all of life, all of eternal life, because God has given us Christ.

We are free to give, to serve, to share, to study, to work, to sacrifice, to advocate, to dance, to sing. We find ourselves able to think and talk about the hard things: about our life, our death, our cares and our joys.

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Thousands of books have been written, trying to explain the mystery of how the bread and wine are the flesh and blood of Christ. The more important question, however, may be how the people who share the bread and wine are changed. How we become the Body of Christ. How we live as Christ comes to live within us, in each cell, each fiber of body and soul.

Whether we feel it or not.

You don’t feel your morning orange juice strengthening your bones or cells. But it does. If you leave church and think you haven’t FELT the presence of Christ or that your life is still trivial and troubled, do not despair. God’s gift of life is given indeed without our effort. Jesus feeds us and the Holy Spirit blows this life around when and where and however the Spirit will.

The true test of the integrity of any worship, whether private or public, is what it leads to – sooner or later -- in terms of changed lives for the worshippers, and changed conditions for the poor, the oppressed, and the abandoned.

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To offer one’s body and blood as food to another is to die. And that’s exactly what Jesus DID.

But Jesus also did MORE – remember Easter Sunday!!!

Jesus' hard words are not a threat, but an invitation and a promise: he and she who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life – NOW! -- and I will raise them up at the last day.

Jesus makes us aware of our mortality, of God's final word in our earthly lives. He invites us to join him so closely that our death is his death. When he dies, we die. When he lives, we live. When he heals, we heal. He invites us to trust the Father whom he trusts. He invites us to the delicious meal of love, shown in ice cream to a despondent woman, shown in coffee and clean clothes to a man without an address, shown in a garden tended to beautify God's house, shown in the care and prayer one for another. And shown in each Eucharist: Holy Communion to comfort, strengthen, embrace and unite us in God's love in the memory of Jesus.

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Steve Garnaas-Holmes understands today's Gospel this way and I like his words:

Jesus gives himself to us, his whole life,
his time, his energy,
even putting his body on the line,
his flesh given over to us for the sake of love.
And we take that love into ourselves,
that loving, physical presence,
and it becomes part of us, part of who we are,
just like our food does.
It fills us and becomes us.
So now we are the body of that love.
And it lives on in us. It lives forever.
And in love we give ourselves away to others,
our time and our energy and even our bodies,
given over for the sake of love,
and that love becomes part of them,
and it lives on, and on....
That love that is us
lives forever.

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Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People August 18

Calling on the spirit of Wisdom to guide our hearts and our minds, let us pray for the church, the world, and all in need.

We call on you, gracious God, to watch over your church, its leaders, teachers, bishops, pastors, children and youth, and all who serve. May we continue to grow and stretch in ways we never thought possible. Give us wisdom in our time of transition.

Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for a plentiful harvest season. We pray for orchards, vineyards, farms, and all of creation, especially for our local farmers. Bless those who fight fires and protect our communities. Help us to protect and conserve the earth.

Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Be with all who seek adequate employment. Guide our economic and governmental leaders to support the people of our world with fair wages and safe working conditions. We pray for peace in every place.

Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Make your presence known to all who feel lost, abandoned, or hurt at this time. Direct your spirit of care to all who seek healing and comfort, especially those we name before you aloud or in our hearts:

Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

May this congregation be a welcome table to all who seek refuge in your grace. We pray for new faces to worship here and for encouragement for those we miss to return to this community.

Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

May we journey on the path of wisdom, looking toward a bright future while remembering from where we have come. We give our thanks for those who have gone before us.

Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**