

## Pentecost 10/Lectionary 19B

August 9, 2009

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

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1 Kings 19:4—8   Psalm 34:1—8   Ephesians 4:25—5:2   **John 6:35, 41—51**

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I receive a lot of newsletters, magazines and journals. Occasionally there's a pearl buried in all those pages I read through every month, so I'll tear it out and file it away, hopefully to bring out at some point in the future. Here's one such example, from a newsletter I received in 2003:

Recently, America OnLine ran a survey about which historical figure you would like to have dinner with. They offered the following choices: Jesus Christ, George Washington, Anne Frank or William Shakespeare. Of course, you could name your own historical celebrity – Jimmy Hoffa, Don Juan, etc, as many people did.

I was perplexed and challenged with this proposition. My first response ran along the following lines: who's picking up the tab? I mean, this could run into a lot of money. Can I bring a guest? Will they be serving vegetarian? Will George Washington even know what sushi is? If we order Chinese, will we share dishes? Can Jesus handle chopsticks? Will there be valet parking? Do I need to bring an interpreter, or will my guest be fluent in English? Are there any lactose intolerance issues that I need to be aware of? After all, this could be a long evening. These are not trivial problems. Though, judging from some of the responses I got from AOL members, they were thought to be.

My first thought was Mahatma Ghandi would be an interesting choice. I mean, after all, he sure looks like he could use a good meal. But then I began to worry. What if I didn't eat everything on my plate? Would he pull that old line, eat! there are children in India who are starving! It never worked for my mother. But if she were cooking for those children no one would have been surprised that they were so thin.

And what about Jesus? Like suppose I'm looking over the wine list and Jesus says, 'Forget it, watch this!' And the next thing I know, he changes my water into wine, and now I'm sitting there drinking red wine with ice cubes out of a water glass and everybody in the restaurant is staring at us, and then, instead of letting me order, he does that thing with the loaves and fishes. Now, I'm not driving all the way into the city for a cold fish sandwich, I don't care who he is."<sup>1</sup>

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This is our third week looking at what's commonly called Jesus' "Bread of Life" discourse in John, which centers around the feeding the five thousand, and the unfolding explanation of this sign. The author of the story I just read certainly presents one person's view of this. To him, though five loaves and two fish were multiplied to incredible proportions, all Jesus had to offer was a "cold fish sandwich." Ugh. It might as well have been lutefisk.

It would seem that many who experienced this sign first-hand thought that that was all there was to it, too – just a “cold fish sandwich,” a “fast food lunch.” In last week’s Gospel lesson Jesus confronts the crowds, saying, “You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

In this short statement, we begin to learn that this event meant something so much more than anyone understood. As we talked about last week, the feeding of the five thousand was intended to be a sign.

But a sign of what? Last week’s Gospel reading gave us a hint. Jesus told the people that, “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.”<sup>2</sup>

So, Jesus is saying that the multiplication of the loaves and fish is somehow akin to the manna the Israelites ate in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. God showered down a strange, flaky white substance that covered the camp every night. It was edible. The people could gather enough each morning only for that day’s needs, because anything left over at the end of each day perished.

Today's Gospel lesson tells us about a very different sort of manna from God in Heaven. Jesus says that he is "the living bread" – not like the exodus manna which perished at the end of each day. People ate that exodus manna, but they still died. No, this Bread of Life, Jesus Christ, is eternal. And not only that, those who would partake of this Bread of Life will also live forever.

But there's something interesting in these verses that we often miss. Did you hear how often Jesus uses the present tense in this passage? For instance, he says, "I **am** the bread of life." Not "I **will be** the bread of life." "I **am** the bread of life." Just as Jesus was the bread of life to those he addressed in this passage, he is for us today. It's not a future promise; it's a here-and-now promise.

Here's another one: Jesus says, "This **is** the bread that comes down from heaven." For those hearing Jesus' words, his promise was of a present reality. He didn't say, "This **will be** the bread that comes down from heaven." No. Present tense. "This **is** the bread that comes down from heaven." And it's present tense for you and me, every time we come to Holy Communion. Jesus isn't telling us, "Eat the bread and drink the wine of Communion and I'll come to you some time in the future." No. He's here with us now, in, with, and under the bread and wine of Communion.

And here's the most stunning use of present tense: Jesus says, "Whoever believes *has* eternal life." He doesn't say, "Whoever believes *will* have eternal life." No. This is another here-and-now promise. Present tense, "Whoever believes *has* eternal life." Your eternal life begins this side of the resurrection, with your belief in Jesus Christ.

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How does this revelation impact how we live our lives in the here-and-now? Does it make a difference to us that the eternal life Jesus has promised begins not in some future time, but right here, right now?

I think it *does* make a difference. It is the difference between believing that we live in an evil age, or believing that we live in an age which is already in the process of being re-created by God. It makes a difference between believing that we are sinful beings awaiting redemption, and believing that we are simultaneously also saints who are called to believe, think, and act as those re-created sinful beings.

Many people throughout history thought it made a difference, too. It is the difference between despairing of ever fixing a broken society, and the hope that society can be re-molded in a way that is pleasing to God. Believing in the present reality of eternal life leads to a love that *serves* our fellow human beings, that helps them to see the re-making of creation before their very eyes and in their own lives.

Today you have the opportunity to participate in that vision of hope. Today you'll be given the opportunity to participate in the work of the ELCA World Hunger appeal. Today, your offering toward the World Hunger Appeal can help us work toward realizing the hope that all people will one day have the basic food that they need to survive.

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Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, *other*-centered men can build up."<sup>3</sup> [*emphasis added*]

Martin Luther King, Jr. believed that living a life centered on God has the power to transform the world because of the *present* reality of eternal life. This present reality gives us the power to work to bring to all people their God-given rights as re-created children of God. It gives us the audacity to believe that all things are possible, even when all seems hopeless.

Now we can see this is no mere "cold fish sandwich" Jesus was talking about. The loaves and the fish were not just a miracle, they were a sign. A sign of things to come, and a sign for the here-and-now.

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Finally, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus makes a most stunning revelation. Jesus says, "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." This is certainly no "fast food lunch" Jesus is talking about, no "cold fish sandwich."

The author of the story I told you back of the beginning of the sermon wanted to know, "Who's picking up the tab?" for this meal he's been invited to imagine. Jesus just told us that. "Who's picking up the tab?" Jesus is picking up the tab. By giving himself – the living bread – up for the life of this world, Jesus picked up the tab. For you. For me. For everyone.

When we are invited to partake of the grace of God in Holy Communion, we're not being offered a "cold fish sandwich"; it's no "fast food lunch." It's a sumptuous banquet of the most precious food in the world, Jesus Christ, the living bread from heaven. To those who believe that Jesus Christ picked up the tab for the banquet, the bread and the wine of Holy Communion offers us an encounter with the living God, the here-and-now God, the God who seeks to draw us closer to Him with each passing moment. The bread and the wine of Holy Communion is a physical encounter with the grace of God who showers down upon us the living bread from heaven. So when you come to the Communion table, eat heartily, drink deeply. Know that your promise of eternal life is not some future event – your eternal life starts today.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Bruni, "My Dinner With Ghandi," in *Capital M*, newsletter of Washington, D.C. Mensa, August 2003, 11. Reprinted from *Redwood Mpire News*, newsletter of Redwood Empire Mensa, June 2002.

<sup>2</sup> John 6:32-33

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted in *The Story File: 1,001 Contemporary Illustrations for Speakers, Writers & Preachers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 123.