

Grace Episcopal Church
August 5, 2012

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min
Text: John 6: 24-35

A young Episcopal priest recently blogged about worship: “Episcopalians are often accused of being too brainy, too intellectual,” he said,

We think too much. We get caught up in the space between our ears and forget about that throbbing muscle in our chests. These accusers are correct up to a point: we do not check our brains at the door. Jesus asks us to love the Lord with all our mind, as well as our heart and strength.¹

This braininess may be why we struggle with texts like these in John’s gospel. They are hard for those who listen. They are hard for those who preach. Because they are multi-layered, calling on more than just intellectual understanding. Today is just the second of five weeks on bread – bread that fed the 5,000 on the Galilee hillside, Jesus as the Bread of Life. Bread that is ordinary but bread that is extraordinary.

Last week was that miraculous feeding of the crowd on the hillside in Galilee – with John’s special twist. For John, the story/the miracle was not primarily about feeding the hungry. The multiplication of the loaves and fish was a *sign* – something that pointed beyond itself to something bigger – the revelation of who Jesus is, the promise of food that will not leave us hungry.

I talked then about my friend Jack, who, along with me, could not get beyond that “space between our ears” to grasp another layer of meaning. We, like the disciples and the people on the hillside, were stuck in the miracle. And Jesus withdrew from the crowd when he knew that they wanted to make a miracle maker their king.

In today’s text, Jesus tries to make them understand the bigger picture. We join the story as they swarm to the other side of the Sea where Jesus and the disciples have gone. To add to the mystery, they had seen the disciples sail away without Jesus, but here they are, all together – with only one boat. How did Jesus get there? He doesn’t answer their question about the how and when of his arrival. He ducks the question just like a teenager who is asked, “what time did you get in last night?”

Instead, he tells them why they have followed him. It is just because of the meal – the sign. Not the greater thing to which that sign points. All they experienced was the meal.

¹ Thomas, Adam, *Ministry Matters* at www.ministrymatters.com, June 15, 2011.

He persists in teaching them, reorienting them. The sign points back as well as forward – back to Moses and the Israelites in the desert where God provided manna to feed them. Forward to the one God has sent. There is more than manna. There is more than loaves and fishes – there is the bread from Heaven, the bread of life that does more than satisfy bodily hunger. It gives life to the soul, filling that gnawing hunger for a love and connection that goes beyond the need for physical sustenance. And Jesus is that bread.

[A word of caution – in reorienting ourselves, we must be careful not to spiritualize this too much. We know from the Gospels that Jesus cared very much for feeding the bodies of the hungry. And John’s Gospel, often called the spiritual Gospel, is very much about flesh and blood – the full human being, not just the spirit. Those who are physically hungry are not going to go beyond that until that is satisfied.]

The young priest blogger I mentioned said that those who accused Episcopalians of being too brainy were right “up to a point.” He went on to say that the intellect is only part of the story of Episcopal worship. He talked about how it calls on all of our senses to encounter the presence of God:

We hear the Word of God read and proclaimed. *We see* the stained glass and changing seasonal color palate. *We smell* the incense puffing from the thurible. *We taste* the bread and the wine. *We touch* one another in the handshake or embrace of the peace of the Lord.²

He talks about the very ordinary things we use – the candles, the wine and water, the oil and bread. Ordinary things that take on extraordinary meaning in the words and the actions of the liturgy – the words and actions of everyone of us, not just the liturgical ministers. These ordinary things, too, are signs pointing beyond themselves.

Bread is the staff of life. Whether it comes in the form of sliced loaves of wheat or white flour, grain pounded into tortillas, or pita, it is a basic staple of diet the world over – and through the centuries. And we can’t eat it just once. It is a daily need. We even pray, don’t we, “give us this day our daily bread.” The bread of life, though enduring and forever, is a bit like that, too. It is something that we must nurture daily through prayer. Through building a relationship with our God. God is there for us, offering us the nourishment for our souls, but we must respond. We must come to the table. We must come with our whole selves: body, mind and spirit.

Why are you here? Why do we gather here on Sunday mornings and other times? Is it to seek magic or miracles or novelty? Something that temporarily satisfies a need? Or do we come to be fed. To acknowledge that sometimes we need something beyond our human abilities to provide? To ask God for the nourishment that fills not just our bellies but our whole selves?

² Ibid.

As we come to the table this day, let us give thanks for a God who loves each and every one of us enough to come to live and teach and heal among us. To be with us always, especially through these sacraments that we receive. And whether we believe that the miracle of Christ's presence with us is in the bread itself or in the Body of Christ gathered at the table (or somewhere in between), let us approach this God who waits with patience for us to reach out for the bread of life with our whole selves – that space between our ears, that wondering, sometimes wandering spirit, and that throbbing muscle in our chest.

Amen.