

“Food for the Journey”

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 18
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, PhD

Sunday, August 2, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29;
Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you noticed how it is with summer? You plan a particularly strenuous activity and you hope for a good day. And what happens? You get the hottest, most humid day of the season!

That’s how it was for Toby and Bess and their four children. Toby had received a promotion, and when the day came that they had to move it was HOT! It was HUMID! It was like being in a sauna.

It was around suppertime. The rental truck was packed, and Bess had brought out the vacuum and the mops and the brooms – she had just finished the cleaning. Just when they were ready to collapse, a large car pulled into the driveway. It was an elderly lady, their neighbor, whom they had met at church. “Oh, wonderful! Great,” she said, “I’m just in time! I have a load of stuff in the trunk, and I need help getting it out. Can you give me a hand?” Todd, Bess and the kids followed her, rolling their eyes, to the back of the car. She popped the trunk, and there was a sight that took their breath away: a large basket of fried chicken, a large bag of dinner rolls, salad, iced tea, an iced cake to die for, and a gallon of ice cream, along with plates and cups and knives and forks. They fell upon the food. You get the picture?

Surely it was something like that for the people whom Jesus fed. A different menu, I’ll grant, but a surprising and very well received meal at the end of their day; a once in a lifetime meal for them, if you will. But in the gospel, Jesus is focused on a meal that is far more substantial, with far greater power and far deeper meaning; food for life, and for more than just a lifetime.

It seems to me that Jesus is referring to a journey-sustaining meal, much like the summer vacation journey meals I enjoyed immensely when I was a young boy. Summer vacation time meant a journey to visit with aunts and uncles and cousins to the north of our home in New Zealand. We couldn’t afford air travel – the cost was out of the question. We didn’t have a car – that was a luxury my family couldn’t afford. But we lived near the main north-south railway line, and so we traveled by train, drawn by snorting, chuffing, hissing steam locomotives. There were only two directions in which we could travel: south (a journey which we never took) and north (the way we always went). The reason was simple: to the north, my mother’s seven brothers and seven sisters had made their homes and raised their families. Whether by fate or canny Scottish design (I was never able to figure out which), my mother’s siblings had managed to space themselves equidistantly along the northern line all the way to its terminal at Picton, five hundred miles away. The train traveled on a narrow gauge track dictated by the rugged coast, the mountainous hills, and the broad valleys along, through, and over which it traveled on its two day journey. Numerous stops were made for water and coal, gaining or giving up a locomotive

or two depending upon the terrain, but stopping strategically for what we called “morning tea” and “lunch” and “afternoon tea” and “dinner” before completing the first half of the journey. A similar day followed before reaching Picton, the northern terminus of the South Island Line. It was during this journey that the wonderful canniness of my Scottish relatives came to light. They had settled in the towns wherever the train had a scheduled stop, which meant no expensive cafeteria meals for us.

The journey was long and dusty, hot and tiring, and not without risk. There were terrifying sections where the train traversed coastal cliffs high above the foaming sea. And there were the tunnels, some of them a mile or more long, narrow and winding, filled with heat and choking sulphur smoke and roiling, scalding steam from the engines.

But there were frequent and very comforting stops along the way where family and copious baskets of food awaited us. Until gritty and dusty, tired and worn – but very well fed – we stumbled off the train into the arms of family waiting to share with us and shelter us at the end of the line. A journey not at all unlike our journey of faith to which scripture bears witness and to which, beloved, you and I ourselves, are called.

We heard read to us in the lesson from Exodus this morning of the great journey in which the people followed Moses and found themselves chosen by God to be His people. Out of that long and dusty journey emerged the nation of Israel, settled securely in the Promised Land. No simple train trip this, but an arduous trek punctuated by hardship and hesitation, wearily walked, against a background of hunger – a hunger to return to Egypt for the comfort of the oppression they had just escaped and for the food they enjoyed there, but left. And behind it all, a deep, ravaging hunger for somewhere secure to lay one’s head to rest in familiar surroundings, safe and sound, to abide with the Lord.

Ah yes, the travail of travel, which wound its way far back into the very foundations of the family of Israel, the chosen children of God. It was a hunger awakened once again in the people who rowed their way across the Lake of Galilee, searching for the One who brought hope and life into their very midst – the One who rekindled their passion for their God and worked wonders of His grace in their midst, the One who had fed them bread and fish in a meal they could not (and would not) forget, and drove them to seek Him out once again.

It speaks to us, doesn’t it, of our own journeying along the pathways of life, of our own hungers and soul-deep longing and searching, just like the people of God. And in our journey, we find ourselves fed in our wilderness wandering with the bread of life and the wine of forgiveness. Just like the lakeside crowd, we have come to the table of the One who offers forgiveness for the things gone wrong and the things done wrong. A meal that sends us forth refreshed and filled with life, for it is in the midst of God’s people, those chosen and those adopted, marked as Christ’s own in the waters of baptism amidst a multitude of weary travelers who gather at church altars around the world. There. There, beloved, we find food and respite. Yes, and strength. For it is on those altars that the bread of life is broken. No ordinary bread, this, but the body of Christ given and broken for us and for our salvation. Nor is the bread out there at the entrance to the gathering space ordinary bread, it’s bread baked and bought and gathered here that others who hunger might be fed. Be generous in your purchases. Be extravagant in your giving, that

out of our bounty others may be fed, for today presents us with a golden opportunity to provide food and life for others as food and life have been so graciously provided for us. For surely, beloved, what we share this day is the bread of life, Jesus Christ, Himself.

Amen.