

“Raisin’ Bread”

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 20
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

Sunday, August 16, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34:9-14;
Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

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

I’m partial to raisin bread, did you know? Here at Trinity it’s what I would call a breakfast menu feature, especially during Lent and Advent when we have breakfasts in association with midweek worship services. Since I’ve been here, people have gotten to know my tastes at these breakfasts – two slices of raisin bread, toasted and buttered, with a cup of coffee or a cup of tea. Is your mouth watering yet? A memorable breakfast you might say; at least a breakfast to look forward to.

Which, of course, was exactly how it was for the crowds of people Jesus fed at the beginning of this chapter from which we heard this morning’s gospel read. Having once been fed and well satisfied, those crowds of people followed Jesus in the hopes of being fed again. And again. And again. But this is the Gospel according to St. John that we are reading. It is a gospel well known for its layered meanings – both for the people who first heard it, and for us – so we are not surprised that there is a deeper reality here than just being fed.

Which brings us to the meal before us this morning, right back here. It couldn’t be much smaller, could it – a wafer, a sip of wine? But the question is: Is that all it is? Is it just a wafer dipped in wine? Or is it something far more profound, something that reaches from now into eternity? Something even more wonderful which gifts those who receive it with life? Real life now and real life beyond the grave. And all that in a meal which is little more than a taste of wafer and wine.

There is a story which some say is apocryphal, mythical, about the famous theologian, Paul Tillich. Tillich was in Chicago addressing group of learned and prominent theologians. Apparently in his address, he suggested that maybe Jesus wasn’t real at all, but some sort of literary character. At the end of his talk, an elderly gentleman stood up, took a bite out of a very large and very juicy apple, and addressed Tillich. As he spoke, he continued to munch on his apple, and then he asked, “Mr. Tillich, can you tell me if my apple is bitter or is it sweet?” Tillich replied, “No, sir, there’s no way I can tell you. I haven’t tasted your apple.” Then the elderly man replied, “And you haven’t tasted my Jesus either.”

What’s he getting at? What did he mean? What did Jesus mean? It’s bizarre, don’t you think, tasting Jesus? And yet it’s no more bizarre than what Jesus has to say to the crowd that followed him: “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.” Gross, don’t you think? The crowd was immediately thrown into confusion; surely He couldn’t possibly mean what He is saying.

Then in a move that's even more astounding and more shocking, Jesus says that not only will they have to eat His flesh, but they will have to drink His blood, as well. And there it is: the bread of life, the meal by which one will live forever. Though it isn't evident to us in translation, Jesus gets even more scandalous when He talks about how it's eaten, how it's received – noisily, and slurpily – something like the way animals act at a trough.

Thankfully, Jesus' emphasis isn't on eating etiquette, but on an eating that, if not desperate, at least is urgently felt by those who receive the meal, for it's a meal to be received because life depends upon it. Our reaction to Jesus' message, I'm sure, is to be somewhat horrified, as it was for those who heard it originally.

The first thing that comes to mind is that we are being encouraged to indulge in some sort of cannibalism. Indeed, in its earliest years, the Christian community faced great difficulty because it was supposed by many that cannibalism was actually at the center of their worship. Thank the Lord TV commentators and pundits weren't around at the time – you can imagine what they would have done with it.

But in John's gospel, of all places, we should be very careful not to be fooled into a simple surface understanding of the text. It's next to impossible to avoid the notion that what is at the heart of this very bizarre story is a deep and profound understanding of what we call Holy Communion. The startling phrases “eat my flesh” and “drink my blood” which seem cannibalistic on the surface, point to the mystery of the participation of believers in the death of Jesus; Listen carefully to the words we repeat during the communion service.

The text also points to the promise of eternal life extended to believers, by which is meant not only life beyond the grave, but the quality of our life now, right here, in the present. So it is that we are enabled to see the bread and the wine as the visible, tangible Word made flesh. What is it that we say? “This IS His body, this IS His blood.” As Lutherans we talk about the real presence of Christ being in, with and under the bread and the wine in conjunction with the word of God. Once the bread and wine have been consumed and the service is over, the wine and the bread revert back to just ordinary bread and wine. In the communion service, it's the meal of life. The wafer, the bread of life; the wine to cup of forgiveness and salvation. After having received this meal, our past, along with all its blemishes, faults, failures, and sin, is over and done with as far as God is concerned. We can remember them all we want, we can fret over them if we wish, but God has set them aside and their spiritually destructive potency quarantined, imprisoned, made impotent, as a result of the forgiveness we receive from God.

And there it is. We walk away from communion with a brand new life and with the promise of an inheritance in the life to come. A bread that raises us up, raisin' bread, if you will. This meal of bread and wine is life-giving because it is God in and through Jesus who gives it to us freely and without condition. It's life giving because it draws us deeper into an intimate relationship with Jesus so that we might abide there and He might abide with us. It's life giving, because it compels us to go into the world to serve and gift others as we ourselves have been served and gifted. Such is the grace of God.

I was to understand this the Advent my sister from New Zealand was here for a visit. Many of you will remember the visit and her being here. It so happened that I was scheduled to lead a Wednesday morning mid-week Advent service. I had worked on a brief homily; the service bulletin was prepared and printed; I set my alarm in time to get here for the 7:00 a.m. service (as many of you know, not my favorite time of day). My sister got up with me and prepared coffee that I might be more alert to serve. Enjoying our coffee, we fell into a conversation. We talked, and we talked, and we talked. And we had more coffee, and we talked some more. I arrived at the church at 9:00 a.m., having forgotten all about the mid-week Advent service. I went to my mailbox to check my mail, and there on a plate, carefully wrapped in saran wrap, were two pieces of nicely buttered and freshly toasted raisin bread!

Amen.