

Forever Bread

John 6:51-58 Bread from Heaven AUG 16 2009

The crowd surrounded Jesus with eager eyes and ready appetites. They were hungry, and, once again, Jesus was talking about bread.

I'll never forget a boy named Tony. He came to church every week without fail. He knew about Jesus. No matter what question I asked in my children's time, Tony was ready with the right answer: Who was born in Bethlehem? Jesus! Who loved to be with children? Jesus! What color is the sky? Jesus! Have you ever played kickball? Jesus! Tony knew that saying "Jesus" was usually the right answer, and he stuck with it no matter the question!

Tony knew all about Jesus, but one day, a Communion Sunday, most of all, he knew he was hungry. His eyes never left the bread on the plate as I said "*This is my body broken for you.*" He could almost taste the juice as I lifted it up the cup and said, "*this is my blood poured out for many*". Tony would have agreed with ANYTHING I said about the bread that day, because he wanted a piece of it to help ease the hunger in the pit of his stomach. I could have said the bread was Jesus' body, I could have said that it was magic bread that came with three wishes from a genie in a bottle. I could have said that it was bread brought by aliens from Jupiter. It didn't matter because Tony was hungry. He would have agreed with anything I said to get a piece of bread.

That day we had a big loaf of fresh bread on the table, and a tall pitcher of grape juice. Tony's stomach was growling as he gazed at them, his chin resting on the edge of the table. You've probably figured it out: Tony's family was poor, he often came to church without having had breakfast. Our coffee hour afterwards might've been the best meal of the day for Tony.

The whole crowd was hungry that day by the sea. They remembered the bread from before, the bread where there were 12 baskets of crumbs left over. But today was going to be different. Jesus looked around and said: "*I am not going to give you THAT bread any more. I am the bread of life, take ME as your bread.*"

They found him hard to understand that day, in the same way that we often find him hard to understand in our own day. We hunger for many things, for food, for strength, for healing, for respect, for happiness, for love, for peace. And Jesus says, TAKE ME. TAKE ME FOREVER. If he simply handed us the bread that would be easy to understand. But what we are given is something very spiritual. He says, TAKE ME, and some of us don't see what it is that he offers. "I eat the bread", someone said to me once, "but I don't feel a thing."

We look for tangible, graspable things, and what Jesus offers can seem so insubstantial. But a piece of bread in the hand is easy to understand. Pick it up, take a bite, feel it settle in your hungry stomach. Forever bread is not so easily understood. Can you hold it in your hand, can you take a bite, can you feel it satisfy your hunger?. The bread in your hand is eaten, and then it's gone. But forever bread ... it lasts. How long? As long as forever!

Tony hungered for other things in his life besides food - for clothing that would fit, for kids who wouldn't make fun of him, for a home without broken windows and trash in the living room. We can identify with hunger like that, too. We hunger for food, but also other things that are vital: for healing and health, for respect and dignity, for happiness, for peace. These ARE spiritual things, the exact things that Jesus spoke about wherever he went, and with everyone he spoke to. He was a spiritual person, a very spiritual person who spoke about God and salvation, but he also fed hungry people, he lifted up those who felt lost and discouraged with the direction of their lives, he offered strength to those doubled over from the heavy burdens of their lives, he started people on the road to healing, and showed that happiness begins with God, not with money, or power, or appearances.

Very spiritual, but also very real. It is for this reason that we celebrate communion around a real table, with real bread and a real cup, because we have come to see that what he offers to the world is no myth or dream, but as real as this table, bread and cup; food for the hungry, strength for the weak, healing for the sick, encouragement for the overwhelmed, joy for the sorrowful.

Tony had his eyes on the bread, and he might have agreed with anything I might have said about Jesus to get a piece of it. Even so, it was a spiritual moment. For he had found his hopes realized in a group of caring people, people who cared so much in their love for the Lord and for him, that he stood in the circle feeling their strength and their hope, knowing that his need would be satisfied. Tony didn't know much about doctrine or theology, but he knew that he was a part of the church family. Most other people in the neighborhood and at school laughed at his oversized, unwashed clothing, and the big holes in his knees, but in this group, in this family of faith, Tony felt the unconditional love of God. That is what communion is all about: knowing in your heart that God's love is extended to you, not because you have earned it, but because you need it. "*You who come to me will never be hungry. You who believe in me will never thirst.*" Those words had special significance for Tony, they also have significance for you. It is forever bread we serve today.