



Sleeping With Bread¹

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

August 5, 2018; John 6:24-35

So let me ask you a question. When was the last time you had something to eat? Was it this morning? Was it last night? How many of you are hungry right now? How many of you wish I hadn't asked you that question because now you aren't going to be able to concentrate on anything I have to say or the rest of the service? How many of you are going to sneak downstairs and see if the donuts are out already?

Being hungry, and being filled, is one of the most primal experiences of life. Today's gospel lesson starts the day after Jesus feeds the five thousand with five loaves of barley bread and two fish. If we zoom in to the scene, I imagine a big, nearly empty grassy field, with maybe some bread crumbs and fish bones here and there. The five thousand had all gathered to hear Jesus because they were hungry for what he was teaching them. He was saying beautiful things about who God is, he was showing them their own stories and their identity in a new and life-giving light. They liked what he had to say so much that the crowd decided they wanted to force him to become a king, so he had to make himself scarce because becoming a physical king wasn't his role. When the crowd couldn't find him most of them disappeared, but some who wanted more stayed on. And so they showed up the next day, looking for Jesus. I wonder what they thought they were looking for? I wonder why they came back?

When they found him Jesus told them they had been seeking him, not because they saw his display of power, but because they had been fed. He said something interesting: he says, "Work for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." It's kind of a paradox to work for something that is a gift, but they

¹ The name of this homily is also the name of a book by Matthew, Dennis & Sheila Linn, *Sleeping With Bread*, referenced in this homily and noted throughout.

jump right at it. What must we do to work the works of God, they ask? What must we do to get this bread that will keep nourishing us?

Jesus says, this is the work of God, that you believe in the one God has sent. The word believe means trust. Trust that I am here to nourish you. Then he says, “I am the bread of life.” In John’s gospel Jesus makes a lot of “I am” statements. “I am the light of the world,” “I am the resurrection and the life,” “I am the good shepherd,” – but in today’s lesson, this is the first time in John’s gospel that Jesus says what he is, and he says he is the bread of life.

I think he starts there because everything starts with hunger and how we choose to fill it.

From the very beginning of scripture, which fruit would Adam and Eve eat? The fruit that they thought would make them like God, the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, the fruit that would give them certainty? Or would they remain able to trust God and their own mortality and limits? When the Israelites were freed from slavery and crossed the sea into the wilderness, the first thing they faced was hunger and thirst in the wilderness. Their very first task was to learn that they could trust God to feed them, just enough manna for every day in a situation where food was impossible. When Jesus was baptized and called Beloved by God, the very first thing that happened to him was to be tempted in the desert, and the first temptation he faced was hunger. So it’s no surprise that the first thing Jesus wants to teach us about God, is that God seeks to nourish us, body and soul, to give us life. And our first task is to recognize our hunger, and trust God to fill it.

One of my favorite authors is a Jesuit priest named Matt Linn, and in a few of his books he tells a story about World War II. He said that especially in cities that had been heavily bombed, there were many orphans whose homes and families had been destroyed. These orphans wandered the streets without food or shelter. Finally, some of them were found and placed in refugee camps where kind people cared for them. But many of them could not sleep. They couldn’t sleep because they were so afraid that the next day they would lose everything again and have no home and no food like they had been before. Even though the adults caring for them assured them that they

were safe, nothing seemed to help them enough to be able to relax and sleep. Finally, one of the adults had the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to sleep with. The bread reassured the children that they ate and were safe and had a home today, and that they would have something to eat again tomorrow. So holding this bread, they were able to sleep.²

Like the orphans in refugee camps in World War II, our first need is to be nourished. Henri Nouwen said that the table is the place of intimacy – it’s the place we meet each other face to face, it’s the place where home is. A baby receives milk from its mother in a way that simultaneously involves food, touch, tenderness, communion, safety, and love. Jesus is invoking all of this for us when he says he is the bread of life – nourishment that comes, not from a single loaf or a single fish, but from a relationship, the ongoing connection with a God who cares about giving us life, body and soul. A God who meets us where we are hungry and grants life that is overflowing, love that is unconditional and that can never be exhausted.

One of my teachers said that many years ago when he was first ordained, he spent two years in a community that gathered together every week to worship, and he could see from their eyes that they were dying of thirst. They were gathering week after week, but they were so hungry, so thirsty, and they didn’t even know it. It’s risky to admit hunger, even to ourselves, in this culture that says success is better and independence is necessary and we should all make sure we’ve gotten our own needs met privately and without showing vulnerability. Sometimes admitting our hunger can feel like failure or being defective. And let’s not forget that some among us, in our own city, are literally hungry. Something like one in six children in the Metro grow up with food insecurity. So I don’t want to overspiritualize this hunger. When Jesus says he is the bread of life, he didn’t separate feeding people physically and feeding them spiritually—he did both.

Whatever else we know about God, we need to know first of all that God seeks to feed all of us, body and soul, for the sake of abundant life. But for whatever reason, it is really hard to trust this. We’ve been taught many things about God – many of them involving a God who wants us to behave, to do good and sacrificial things, a God who

² See Matthew, Dennis & Sheila Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life, and Making Heart Bread* (Paulist Press).

wants us to love other people and take care of them, maybe a God who is not always pleased with us. Jesus is telling us that what comes first is hunger, and trusting that we can be filled.

The alternative to trust is a kind of slavery. We all get tempted to feed our hungers in ways that are not life-giving, whether that's through addiction, or overeating, or isolating, or overwork. Those who live in poverty sometimes have to make terrible choices about how to make ends meet. When the people of Israel faced hunger in the wilderness, the first thing they wanted is to go back to slavery in Egypt, because at least there they knew where their next meal was coming from. And we shouldn't be too quick to judge them for this. What do we rely on to make sure our hungers are satisfied? We are all like the orphans in World War II who want to sleep with bread. Since Adam and Eve in the garden ate the fruit they thought would make their own judgment like God's, we have wanted certainty and power instead of daily vulnerability and trust, instead of asking Jesus, give us this day our daily bread, help us today with the needs that we have.

Fortunately, God understands the human condition. When the people approached Jesus the day after he fed the five thousand, and asked Jesus to show them a sign, he told them that just as God gave the starving Israelites manna from heaven, God is still giving bread from heaven, in the form of Jesus. The story is ongoing. The wilderness of human experience has not changed, and neither has God. Give us this day our daily bread, we pray in the Lord's prayer. Each week we come here to receive a small piece of bread to remind us that God is still feeding us. So how do we learn to risk trusting God every day, and not in just in the abstract? How do we recognize our hungers and name them to God?

There is a daily practice called the Examen that I've shared with you before. It's an ancient prayer from St Ignatius of Loyola that people have used for hundreds of years. At the end of every day, seek to become aware of the unconditional love and presence of God. Then ask yourself, when today was I most grateful, and why? When could I most give and receive love? Then take that in. That is the nourishment God is offering you for today. And also ask yourself, when was I least grateful? When did I not belong? When was I hungry? And bring that condition to God also. Allow God to love

you in that situation, and ask God to grant you wisdom and the resources you need to heal and be nourished. Then you'll be able to sleep with bread. Then you can be fed, so that you can become able to provide bread for others as well. Amen.