

Sermon – “Bread of Angels”

Sunday, August 2, 2015

Scripture: Psalm 78:23-29, John 6:24-35

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

In our first scripture reading, Psalm 78:23-29, the psalmist testifies that hope is grounded in communal history and memory: the history of humanity’s tendency toward mistrust and the memory of God’s tenacious hospitality in spite of that distrust. God’s love is stronger than our fear. When the Israelites question God, asking, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” God responds with divine gifts of manna and quail, given daily for nourishment and sustenance. Let us open our hearts and minds to the word of God.

23 Yet God commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven; **24** God rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. **25** Mortals ate of the bread of angels; God sent them food in abundance. **26** God caused the east wind to blow in the heavens, and by God’s power God led out the south wind; **27** God rained flesh upon them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas; **28** God let them fall within their camp, all around their dwellings. **29** And they ate and were well filled, for God gave them what they craved. Amen.

Our second scripture reading, John 6:24-35, outlines the events that occur the day following Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the 5000 with bread and fish, which we read together last week. Jesus and the disciples have landed safely on the other side of the Sea of Galilee in Capernaum. The disciples are still digesting the meaning of Christ walking on the water and the people are still trying to grasp the enigma of who Jesus is by using the best tools their religion offers: the evidence of miracles, tradition and Scripture. Jesus, on the other hand, wants to communicate that faith is more than clarity of facts or intellectual assent, faith is an encounter with the living God that changes one’s life. Hear now, God’s holy word.

24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. **25** When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" **26** Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. **27** Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set God’s seal." **28** Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" **29** Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in the One whom God has sent." **30** So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? **31** Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat." **32** Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. **33** For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." **34** They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." **35** Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Bread of Angels”

Text: “Mortals ate of the bread of angels; God sent them food in abundance.” Psalm 78:25

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give us this day our daily bread and nourish our spirits with your abundant presence in our lives. As we reflect together on your Word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

Bread of Angels is the title of a bronze sculpture created by Peter’s father, Will Kieffer, and dedicated at Yale University in 1992 where it is displayed in the Ezra Stiles College. *Bread of Angels* is a sculpture of the nineteenth President of Yale University and Renaissance scholar, Angelo Bartlett Giamatti looking upward toward the heavens. Along with the Renaissance, Dr. Giamatti had a lifelong interest in baseball and became the Commissioner of Major League Baseball before his untimely death in 1989. Some of us may remember him negotiating Pete Rose’s ban in an effort to bring integrity back to the game and the game back to the people.

Bart Giamatti became President of Yale in 1978, Peter’s freshman year, and made an impression on Peter’s father when he welcomed the incoming students with a challenge to venture the deep waters of knowledge and pursue wisdom for the sake of wisdom and not just as a means to a profession. Giamatti believed a liberal arts education is both empowering and liberating, and advocated for the students he served. Peter remembers attending one of the Halloween parties hosted on the front lawn of the President’s house and seeing a couple of students surreptitiously dressed in Giamatti costume standing nearby. “Who is the real Angelo Bartlett Giamatti?” Peter thought. Standing next to the real Yale President was a little boy, Paul Giamatti, who is a well-known actor today.

The title Will Kieffer chose for the sculpture of Giamatti, *Bread of Angels*, is a reference to Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. Before Will became a sculptor, he was an insurance executive in Hartford, Connecticut. One day he asked an artisan doing work on the Aetna Building what he needed to do to become a sculptor. He was told he needed to learn Italian and read Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*... so that’s what he did.

Dante’s epic poem was written in the 14th century as the Dark Ages were coming to an end and the Renaissance Period, the birth of knowledge, was shedding light on Europe. Dante’s poem presents a medieval world-view of life after death. On the surface, the poem describes Dante’s travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise but on a deeper allegorical level, it represents the soul’s journey towards God.

One first hears word of the *bread of angels* in Dante’s third poem, *Paradise*. The stanza opens with the deep, unexplored waters they are about to charter... those who raise their mouths in search of angel’s bread are those who hunger for the knowledge of God or wisdom in the high seas before them. The *bread of angels* in Dante’s paradise symbolizes the pursuit of knowledge and seemed an apropos title for the sculpture of a Renaissance scholar who spent a lifetime pursuing knowledge and truth and encouraging others to do the same.

Dante’s repeated emphasis that faith alone will permit a reader to grasp the wonders to come indicates *the bread of angels* is not simply *food for thought*. It is reinvested by Dante with theological marrow and provides *food for the soul*. (Sheila J. Nayar)

However, the soul is not fed simply by having knowledge of God and God's creation. Partaking of the *bread of angels* is participating in a relationship with God. This is the insight Christ is trying to impart to those who seek him following the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. They are trying to make sense out of their experience and to connect their experience with their faith tradition, Moses, and the gift of manna... the bread of angels revered in Psalm 78.

When Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty,' he is saying that faith means more than clarity about the facts or belief in a set of propositions. Faith is an encounter with a person, the one who is 'the way, and the truth, and the life.' The one who speaks to us in this curiously metaphorical way is the one who desires not only that we think about him, we are called to feed on him, to ingest him, implying that we could starve to death without him in our lives. The truth being communicated here is so peculiar that mere surface comprehension, mere intellectual assent, is inadequate. When John Calvin was asked to explain the Eucharist, he said that he would rather experience it than to understand it. Actually to feed upon the truth of who is Jesus Christ, to find primary sustenance in him, is better even than to understand him. (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, William Willimon*)

According to William Willimon, as modern people, we have moved beyond the Renaissance and the birth of knowledge to believing we have an inalienable right to comprehend everything. One of the promises of modernity is that anyone—regardless of character, talent or experience,—could “get” any idea, provided the proper intellectual methodology was utilized.

There is great hubris in this assumption and it simply is not true. The truth is there are many things we do not understand, important things in life that are to be celebrated and experienced and revered without knowing how or why. Encountering the One who is the bread of life is one of those things and begins with the honest admission there is a good chance whatever we think about the Word made flesh, we may not get it. Partaking of the bread of angels begins with humility about what we can and cannot know and the willingness to be taught by a Savior who nourishes our bodies and sustains our spirits in abundance. May we continue to raise our mouths in search of angel's bread and may we hunger for righteousness and justice in the deep, unexplored waters we travel on our journeys toward God. Amen.