

Sermon for Pentecost X – Proper 13

Sunday, August 1, 2021

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Do not work for the food that spoils, but for the food that endures. John 6:27 (NIV)

When I was a child – now over a half century ago – there was a commercial that struck me then, and has stuck with me since. It advertised Wonder Bread. The ad said: Wonder Bread: Helps build strong bodies twelve ways. It was soft. It was white. And if you believed the ad, it helped build strong bodies because of its 12 added ingredients.

It was leavened, and it was full of so many preservatives that even if you left Wonder Bread outside its cheery white packaging – with red, yellow and blue balloons on the wrapper – it wouldn't spoil. So among its other wonders, Wonder Bread seemed to stay fresh nearly forever.

Last week, Jesus fed the multitudes with leavened bread, and the number twelve played a role in that story too. After the thousands all had their fill, the leftovers filled twelve basketsful of fragments. Fragments that Jesus commanded be gathered up, so that – as he said – nothing would be lost.

The twelve baskets symbolized that Jesus had provided enough food, not just for the thousands who had gathered to hear him teach, but far more than that—enough for the whole of the people of Israel, all twelve tribes, to have enough to eat. In so doing, Jesus had provided what the prophets had foretold of the messianic age: that every one would sit under his or her own vine and fig tree and have enough to eat. And so the crowds chased after him. To get more bread. But there is a problem with what they seek, as Jesus himself points out. No matter how much bread was left over, and no matter how much more bread Jesus might make for them, eventually that kind of bread would spoil, for unlike Wonder Bread it was not loaded with preservatives. In time, it would spoil.

As a breadmaker on NPR once said of bread, “There is a very fine line between fermentation and putrefaction.”* For the very same kind of metabolic reactions that cause the yeast in bread dough to ferment also produce the bacterial fermentation that causes bacteria in bread to putrefy and spoil the loaf. And so in Jesus' day, and in all times before the advent of refrigeration or artificial preservatives, over time the turning of yeast's fermentation into putrefaction meant the difference between eating

bread that would build up the body, or eating bread that had spoiled and could lead to sickness or even death.

Jesus senses that the crowds are following him for the wrong reason. They want to make him king [John 6:15], the messianic king who will provide them bread over and over, keeping them well fed. Jesus refuses to be the kind of earthly king they want, a Jewish version of a Roman emperor providing panem et circenses, bread and circuses, keeping the people content – for as long as the bread and miracles last.

But Jesus wants to provide them something of greater depth. He wants to provide them with his very Self, the divine sustenance that God has sent him into the world to be. A sustenance that would not spoil – in both senses of the word “spoil.” Jesus was to be – in the fullness of his goodness, his unselfish self-giving that desires peace and justice, love and life forever – Jesus desires to be in those senses, lasting bread that would never putrefy, but feed forever. And Jesus meant to be for them something that would not spoil them – so that he would be a different kind of messiah than a spoiled King David grabbing and devouring a beautiful Bathsheba for his wife. Jesus wanted to be for them true and lasting sustenance, so that they could grow up not only into stronger bodies, but stronger souls. Souls that would be unselfish, that would share food, and peace, and goodness with one another, giving themselves as bread to one another, just as he was going to give himself as bread for them, first at the Last Supper, and then at every Eucharist from Maundy Thursday until the end of this world, as it passes from being a world of bread that spoils and does not last into the world to come, where the very substance of God feeds forever and never spoils.

What does this bread of life that is Jesus’ very heart and soul look like? Of course, in an immediate way, it looks like what we will do together at this Table in just a few minutes. We will take just a small bit of bread, and thanking God for it, we will break it, and give it, and share it, so that it is enough for each of us. And more than enough for just us. It is enough for all who would come to this table. For all. For the rich and the poor. For the well-known and unknown. For the swift of mind, and for the slow to understand. For the already compassionate, and for the ones not-yet-able-to-forget-self enough to be able step aside so that someone else could step forward to the Table first. And when we step to this Table together, we begin to carry within us the very life and soul of Jesus, and we begin to be transformed from people who seek bread and miracles for ourselves, so that we might begin to become bread and miracles for others.

An example? In the early months of 1942, England was sinking into the darkest days of the Second World War. Hundreds were dying as Liverpool, Exeter, and Bath we

blitzed by the German Luftwaffe. But on July 31, 1942, 79 years ago yesterday, a group of Quaker scholars and social activists, together with some university academics gathered in Oxford and founded Oxfam, (more formally known as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief) – and began their campaign for food supplies to be sent through the Allied naval blockade to starving women and children in Axis-occupied Greece. They themselves were hungry, for rationing had begun. But they were hungry for more than bread. Not seeking food for themselves, or peace for themselves, or goodness for themselves, they acted for the sake of others – seeking food, and peace, and goodness for those far away from them in Greece. And so they became, as it were, the very bread of life – Jesus – for the women and children of Greece. And to this day, Oxfam seeks to provide bread and goodness for the hungry and those whose lives have been ravaged by war and sickness around the world. Jesus, bread of life. Bread that doesn't spoil. Bread that lasts.

Closer to home and closer to our own time, I think of another time when Jesus, bread of life, was made manifest in something more lasting than just the bread of one meal.

It took place at Paul's Place, a soup kitchen in Baltimore that some of you have heard me preach about before. Paul's Place is in the Pigtown neighborhood of Baltimore, and this feeding with more than just bread happened right after lunch on the eve of Thanksgiving in 1983. I was one of the volunteers that day in the soup kitchen. A young Black man, whom I had never before seen at lunch, asked if he could help with the clean-up as lunch was coming to a close. I welcomed his help warmly. He and I together bagged up the trash, and shared some easy conversation as we carried the trash bags down the fire escape from the kitchen into the alley behind the parish hall.

As we descended those steel stairs, and began to load the trash into the dumpsters, I heard him say: "You know, Father, you all serve some real good food up there. But you serve something that tastes even better, and lasts longer. You serve love and peace." For a while, I was tongue-tied, as I watched him toss his bags of trash into the dumpster. I turned away from him and the dumpster, climbed back onto the bottom landing of the fire escape to grab the last two bags of trash and then heaved them into the dumpster. I turned back, having finally found my voice again, and wanted to say thank you to him. But he was gone. I looked each way down the alley, and did not see him. I ran down the alley and out onto Washington Boulevard, and he was not to be seen. To this day, I believe that Christ himself visited Paul's Place that day in the person of that Black man, and helped me to learn that Jesus, the Bread of Life, can be found, not just in the bread of the Eucharist, but in any place

where food, and peace, and love are shared. For these are the bread of life, and they last beyond any one meal, and any miracle, however stirring. Do not work for the food that spoils, but for the food that endures.

May it be so. Amen.

- With thanks to the biblical scholar D. Mark Davis, author of *Left Behind and Loving It*.