

Sermon – July 11, 2021 – Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Church in the City of Boston

Our Daily Bread

“Give us this day our daily bread.” Amen

If you and I pray any prayer each day, it is the one that Jesus our Companion and Savior himself taught us, with its simple, essential words: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Daily bread. Something that unites us and divides us. Daily bread unites is in that it is the very thing we all need to survive – rich and poor, young and old, those we know and love, and those we have never met and those we hate with a hatred that turns our stomachs.

But daily bread also divides us: in that it is the very thing that some of us have so much of, we don't ever have to think about it, or say thank you to God for it, while others have so little of it, we cannot sleep because our stomachs growl and we beg God for it not only at “mealtimes” but also moment by moment.

Daily bread. That things which makes our mouths water as we wait to savor it. That thing which makes our stomachs growl, and our souls rise up in rebellion, as we realize that we do not have even the bare minimum we need, while others just a few blocks or miles away have so much that they fill whole garbage bags with it, week in and week out, and grumble that the rotting food - the rotting daily bread in their hot summer garbage cans - smells to high heaven. I wonder what God in his high heaven thinks and feels as He smells that rotting food, and as She – the mother of us all who gave us the abundance of Eden's garden to share – hears our neighbors' rumbling bellies.

Daily bread. But sometimes, by grace, the bread we took for granted suddenly disappears, and we are left realizing that it is not “my daily bread”, but “our daily bread,” a gift from God meant for all of us.

It was about this time of the year. Summer light was cascading into the kitchen in our house in WV. My brother – just about two – was sitting in his high chair. You know the old fashioned wooden kind, with a curving wooden tray – his food platter – right in front of him. My mother has just put a Fig Newton – his favorite cookie – on his tray. Dave picked up it up, and leaned his right elbow on the wooden food platter-tray. A bit distracted, he looked across the room at me, and gave me one of his characteristic wide smiles. As he smiled at me, Taffy – our little terrier – leapt up and expertly snatched the entire Fig Newton out of my brother’s hand – never touching his hand with her teeth or even lips. Dave never felt a thing. He looked back from smiling at me, and looked at his hand, ready to take a bite of his Fig Newton. His look of utter confusion and disappointment that day is one I remember to this day, now nearly sixty-five years later.

So often our stance towards life, our attitudes and reactions to what has happened to us, and is happening in the world around us, are mirrored clearly by our body language, and the look on our faces and in our eyes. King David bodies forth his exuberant joy in his unrestrained dancing before the ark of God, joy at his opportunity to bring the ark of God, with the tablets of the covenant, into the holy city of Jerusalem. It was believed that the Divine Presence hovered between the wings of the cherubim on either side of the ark. So no wonder David was overjoyed. It is as if he were dancing before God’s very Self, invisible though it was, hovering over the wings of the cherubim, just as the invisible Spirit of God was said to have hovered and brooded over the waters at the beginning of the Creation. It is as if David is saying: “How good it is to be here. God is here among us. We are here together, you, and I, and God! And I am filled with joy at our mutual presence – our communion – with one another.”

And so David does what any good Jew of his time would do. He makes an offering in thanks to the God who feeds him and his people. He makes an offering of well-being. And what a wonderful term that it: “offering of well-being.” Thanks for all the abundant goodness of God that makes our well-being possible. So David burns up some of the good gift of God, offering it back to God, as a way of saying two things. First, thank you for giving us this good food to offer. And second, thank you for the well-being that this good food gives us; thank you for feeding us and sustaining our well-being.

And when he has given back to God in thanks a portion of what God has given, he gives away other portions to all his people, so that – as the text says – he “distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins.” And because of his generosity, the people experienced their well-being, and found their well-being satisfied, and so as the story ends; “they went back to their homes.” Knowing their well-being was sustained by God’s abundance, and by the generous and thankful heart of their leader, King David, they could go back home in peace...thankful, well-fed, and at ease.

John the baptizer (whom we meet for the last time in today’s passage from Mark’s gospel) undergoes his own passion, in a sort of upside down and backwards “last supper,” a foreshadowing of Jesus’s passion. Instead of Jesus’ peaceful and loving last supper, by which he gives himself freely in an unbloody sacrifice of bread and wine, a sacrifice of well-being to strengthen his friends for the ordeal they will face the next day, John’s passion is set in the context of a very different kind of meal, a “last supper,” a blowout birthday banquet thrown by King Herod, not for the wellbeing of all his people, but as a near opposite of “our” daily bread for all. It is a banquet only for his courtiers and family, not for us, but only for them. Not a meal of thankful well-being, with some offered to God, and the rest shared out freely amongst all and sundry. But a hoarded and overdone banquet only for the already well off and powerful.

And at the center of this banquet is not a thank offering to God in gratitude for the abundance God offers to support the well-being of all, but a macabre and horrifying sacrifice not to God, but to his greedy daughter-in-law, who wants the head of John the Baptist on a platter, as a vengeful and stomach-turning meal, truly a meal turned upside down. Instead of giving life, and extending thanks to God for well-being, it is a slap in God’s face, a sacrifice of the godly prophet, the one who has spoken on God’s behalf, but whose words have made Herod’s wife – and Salome’s mother – so angry that she tells her daughter to ask not for something life-giving in response to her delightful dance in front of Herod and his courtiers. Not life-giving, death-dealing. David’s dance of joy, has been turned into a dance of death. And the platter of thankful well-being has been turned into a platter of death.

I cannot help but think that these two stories serve as a double warning to us in our own day. To those of us who are so well fed that we no longer dance with joyful

thanksgiving before God, but slurp our food quickly and forget to say thank you, we have a forceful warning. To eat without thankfulness is a first step towards a banquet that leads to selfishness, self-celebration and death. Food hoarded amongst those of us too wealthy and well fed to remember that in this very square, there are hungry men and women every night who have not the food for their well-being that we pray for – falsely – when we ask God for “our daily bread,” and then fail to share out that bread with others, but keep it to our well-fed selves.

And a second warning, that when we live this way, celebrating the goodness and well-fedness of ourselves and our fellow well-fed, well-off family, and friends and neighbors, we are just one step from cutting off the head of the ones who remind us that there are haves and have nots. We cut off their heads, not literally of course, but figuratively, by failing to look them in their hungry eyes, and deal with the sinful and growing gap between the fed and the hungry, the rich and poor in our nation, and in our world. We in effect cut off their heads, because we will not look them in their hungry eyes. We cannot stand to look at their hungry lips.

So much bad news. So where is the Gospel’s good news for us today? Where is the hope for us? Look here with me [gesturing towards the altar]. We are about to come to this common table, where all of us share a tiny bit of food, a bit that turns the world upside down. Where millionaires and poor have just the same amount – the fullness of God’s goodness and grace in a taste of bread. Where the powerful and those at the margins eat at the same table. Where we have a chance to notice, to really look at one another’s hungry faces, knowing that we are all just a meal away from needing to rely on someone else for our daily bread. Remember the poorly-paid folks in our grocery stores who risked their lives to feed us during the pandemic. Remember: the Latinas at Finagle a Bagel who make food for our Sunday brunch while we get to gather in worship. And, with God’s grace, remember our unhoused brothers and sisters who – if we dare look them in the face and welcome them to our service – they have the chance to become real to us. Really part of “our daily bread,” our companions at God’s table. And perhaps, just perhaps, we will begin here to learn that the daily bread God gives us in the Eucharist is meant as a symbol for the daily bread we are to share every day. Can we give away some small bit of our food to the hungry? Maybe a tithe for the well-being of those God intends to share our daily bread?

Will we say grace over each meal? My oldest sister is a devout Tibetan Buddhist, and before she takes the first bite at each meal she recites what our Buddhist brothers and sisters call a gatha prayer:

“The joys and pains of all beings are present in the gift of this food.

Let us received it in love and gratitude.

And in mindfulness of our brothers and sisters of every kind who are hungry or homeless, sick or injured, or suffering in any way.”

Or as some of like to pray in the grace of our own Christian tradition:

Give us this day our daily bread. May it truly be for all of us. For these and all thy blessings, give us thankful hearts. Help us provide for other’s needs, and save us all for Christ’ sake. Amen.

And so, as my brother David learned, it was not just he who needed his daily bread. But our dear Taffy, hungry at his feet, who also needed to be fed. And leapt for joy at the chance to share his Fig Newton.

Amen.