

**Reflection on the Word: August 12, 2018**  
**Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35; 41-51**

Bread is something that the majority of us would agree is a staple of life. Most countries have a type of bread in their diet, and in Jesus' day bread was an essential food. The bread which Jesus would have been familiar with was not baked in a raised loaf and sliced, as we most commonly see it; but the bread would have been similar to pita, something flat, like we use in a wrap.

I remember years ago, when I was travelling in the Holy Land, that at a meal, there would be a number of dishes on the table containing chopped meat, tomatoes, peppers, yogurt, greens, and so on. We weren't given personal cutlery - knives, forks, spoons - as we are accustomed to at our own tables. The bread served as the cutlery. The food would be scooped onto the bread, and then the bread would be wrapped around it to hold the food together, until you got it to your mouth. That was the manner of eating common in Jesus' day, as well.

Eating is fundamental to life. It's something people in every age have taken seriously. And perhaps one reason Jesus used the image of bread to describe Who He was, is because Jesus wants us to take Him as seriously as we do the other fundamental necessities of life.

As I was thinking about the words which Jesus speaks in the gospel of John, "I am the Bread of Life" ... I couldn't help but think how the bread served at that table on my Holy Land visit, is a kind of metaphor for the relationship which Jesus has with us. Like the bread, it is Jesus who holds everything together so life is more meaningful and fulfilling. It is Jesus, in his own body, given and broken for us, who helps us to know and understand the extent of God's love for all. And as bread provides physical nourishment, it is Jesus who provides the spiritual sustenance we need for the journey that is life.

For each of us, as part of the church community, it is in Jesus' name that we have received the call to follow and witness ... to live in love, as Christ loved us ... to be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Of course, there are times when we fail to live according to Christ's example of holy living; there are moments when other things, more worldly things, attract us and call out to us; there are occasions when we readily make excuses for neglecting our calling and our obligation to be part of the work of building God's kingdom of light and love and peace. There are times when our anger causes us to sin, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians. Times when the words we speak hurt another, when what we should be about is building up the other person. But at those times, may we somehow remember the significance of our calling, and the blessing of our baptism by which we are named as Christ's, affirmed as God's precious children .... and by which we take up a daily journey of faith which we will travel until the moment of our death.

Years ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick, the influential preacher who served at Riverside Church in New York City, was making a tour of Palestine and other countries of the Near and Middle East. He was invited to give an address at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, where the student body comprised citizens of many countries and representatives from sixteen different religions.

What could one say that would be relevant or of interest to so mixed and varied a group? This is how Fosdick began: "I do not ask anyone here to change his/her religion; but I do ask all of you to face up to this question: 'What is your religion doing to your character?'"

For too many, religion with its rules, dogma and doctrine actually gets in the way of living the life of love to which God calls us as imitators of Christ. And sometimes there is a huge gulf between what we believe or say, and what we actually do in everyday life. Perhaps you have heard the statement "What you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear a word you say."

Author Ron Lee Dunn tells the story of two altar boys. One was born in 1892 in Eastern Europe. The other was born just three years later in a small town in Illinois. Though they lived very separate lives in very different parts of the world, these two altar boys had almost identical experiences. Each boy was given the opportunity to assist his parish priest in the service of communion. While handling the communion cup, they both accidentally spilled some of the wine on the carpet by the altar. There the similarity in their story ends.

The priest in the Eastern European church, seeing the purple stain, slapped the altar boy across the face and shouted, "Clumsy oaf! Leave the altar." The little boy grew up to become an atheist and a communist. His name was Marshall Josip Tito - dictator of Yugoslavia for 37 years.

The priest in the church in Illinois upon seeing the stain near the altar, knelt down beside the boy and looked him tenderly in the eyes and said, "It's alright son. You'll do better next time. You'll be a fine priest for God some day." That little boy grew up to become the much-loved Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, known for his preaching and especially his ministry on American television and radio... One of his often-quoted statements is this:

***"Show me your hands. Do they have scars from giving? Show me your feet. Are they wounded in service? Show me your heart. Have you left a place for divine love?"***

Just this past week, John and I were saddened, watching the news, to hear of the death of 96 year old Philip Riteman, the Holocaust survivor who, a few years ago, shared his story with a large group of people gathered here at our church, and the next day at the local High School. One of the amazing things about Riteman was that, despite the horrors he endured in the concentration camp, despite the loss of his whole immediate family at the hands of the Nazis, despite the many reasons for him to be bitter and hate-filled, he was still able, in sharing his story, to say: "It is better to love than to hate."

Riteman knew that hate would destroy him and that love had power to redeem and make whole.

We all have experience of people, like Riteman and that priest in Illinois who spoke tenderly to a young altar boy, who walk in the way of love; but we also know of those who, professing love, could have it said of them: "What you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear a word you say."

Another phrase that I've heard used often is this one: "You are what you eat." And perhaps that's why the metaphor of Jesus as the "Bread of Life" is so important. Do you remember the words that are spoken as we gather as a community around the table for Holy Communion? "Take and eat ... this is my body broken for you ..." Each time we eat the bread, we find ourselves being fed by Christ's own presence, and in that feeding, we also share as participants in the divine life.

In our eating we are part of the long story of a God who "feeds" and a people who serve. Of a God who gives of God's self and a people who follow in the way. We partake of the Bread of Life, because we recognize our own hunger and need of sustenance, as well as our own dependence on God. And in our sharing of the Bread of Life, we also acknowledge that God's will for all of us ... and that means all, is to be restored, saved, healed, made whole!

As one person put it:

*We cannot eat of this bread and forget.*

*We cannot eat of this bread and walk away.*

*We cannot eat of this bread and go on with life as usual.*

Because God has called us to leave our cushy pews, our comfortable places of worship, to go out and see the plight of those around us and to love and care for one another . . .

Both Jesus and Paul call us into a community of those who recognize that we have been beneficiaries of an amazing grace, through Christ who loved us and gave himself for us. We have found our sustenance in him, and we cannot just continue eating our fill of the Bread of Life, while ignoring the plight of those who desperately need the sustenance that Christ, working through us, can give.

The community called the church is at its core a community of people who hunger for what is right, just and loving. We are a people drawn, not by anger, judgement, or harsh words of condemnation, but by love. A community of people whose identity is rooted in what it means to be sustained by the presence of Christ's self in our gathering and in our going forth – as we take up the ministry to which we have been called through God's abundant and sustaining love.

From the very beginning of the story of faith, God has been giving us of God's self and inviting us to take this sustenance (manna in the wilderness, the broken bread of Jesus' life, given for all), and to use it as a source of being peace and love and light in our world, on behalf of God's kingdom. As the apostle Paul reminds us: Follow God's example, as dearly loved children; and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us. – May it be so! Amen.