

Rev. Jennifer Adams
Sermon Preached on August 2, 2009 in Holland, Michigan
“I am the Bread of Life- Part I”

This morning we continue with the second in a five week series of gospel readings from the 6th chapter of John. Last week we heard about a miracle - Jesus multiplied 5 loaves and 2 fish and fed five thousand people. And this week and for the next three Sundays we'll hear Jesus teach variations on the theme of the bread of life. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” Now as we walk through these weeks know that the gospel of John is the only gospel that does not contain a story about the Last Supper. In John there is no final meal with the disciples before Jesus is betrayed and tried. There are no “words of institution” in this gospel where Jesus tells the disciples to take and eat and to do this in memory of him. Instead, in the gospel of John, we get Chapter 6. Where Jesus not only shares the bread and but proclaims to all who will hear him that he is the bread, the bread of life and that within that bread there is something of holiness and eternity for us to chew on and swallow and take into ourselves.

Now we can go at this a number of ways and I can assure you that we will over the next few weeks. But where I want to begin today is with stories – two this morning and a few more over the next three weeks because stories are the best way I can think of to help us understand what all of this means. This chapter in John is about Eucharist for us – about the meal we share and the food we eat and the reasons why this isn't just any food – it's the gifts of God for the people of God. In it there is the Christ. So while we listen through this chapter over the next month, I'll give you some theology to help it unfold, but in order for this chapter to become ours in ways that we can truly take into ourselves - we need stories, our stories. Here's what I mean:

Story number one took place almost 25 years ago when I was 16 year old. The setting was a church youth group canoe trip, Up North, near Grayling on the AuSable River. [As a side note since my mother is actually here this morning, I need to give her credit for getting me there. I was a slightly reluctant youth group participant, and yes, I see the irony in that. So for all you youth out there today, I will tell you that I'm glad she made me go. And for all you parents out there, I'm glad I didn't have much of a choice. I needed it even though I didn't know it. OK back to the story. . .] We were a “typical” youth group, (not quite as extraordinary as ours here at Grace is, or course) and this was a typical sort of canoe trip, the kind that has been taken by just about every Michigan youth group since the dawn of time or since the dawn of Christ or since Christ came to Michigan – you get the point. And like any gathering of people some of us were immediately comfortable in the whole scene and some of us weren't. But for better or for worse, God had brought us together for 48 hours. We got up there on a Friday, stayed up late watching a movie, and stayed awake later talking about school and families and friends and things going on in the world or at least in our world. We got up early on Saturday morning, ate pancakes (a youth group requirement), made sandwiches – peanut butter and jelly on hamburger buns - and got in groups of two or three for the ride down the river. Now as luck would have it I ended up as part of a dreadfully inexperienced threesome and we tipped over about every ten minutes. It was frustrating at first but got to be kind of fun as we soaked ourselves repeatedly and watched our leaders panic slightly at just about every turn in the river. And it was all kind of normal youth stuff until we got to the end of the trip and pulled our canoes out of the water and

then an amazing thing happened. The priest gathered us in a circle, tipped a canoe upside down, and spread out a towel over its back. He set a cup on the towel and poured some wine into it. He took a bun like we had used for lunch and placed that on the tipped over canoe; then he said a prayer; blessed it all, broke the bread and fed us by passing the “Body of Christ” around to a group of soaking wet, very happy young people. And what happened on that trip was that I “got it,” a little more than I had before. I got that Eucharist was about journey and it was made up of the stuff of our journey – buns and wine and a tipped over canoe and water and each of us; around the circle that day was our goofing around and our very real conversations, our tipping over, our righting ourselves, our risks, our safety, our awkwardness, our eating and our just being there together with Christ there too. Christ right there on the canoe. In the bun. In the wine. Among us. In us. Because of us. Despite us. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus said.

Story number two. Grace Church about 14 years ago. It happened during a Sunday morning service where a four year old was baptized with her infant sister. Now this was a four year old who had been receiving blessings at the altar for her whole life; she had never requested communion, never reached out to grab the bread or made any other spontaneous move like we get to see here every now and then. She was kind of a quiet kid actually, but she was here almost every Sunday. And so that morning we celebrated her and her sister’s baptism. And it was beautiful as baptisms always are. And when we got to the Eucharist we said the prayer and broke the bread and people came forward and since this family was sitting near the back of the sanctuary, they were near the end of the line. So by the time this little girl got up here, it looked as if she was about to burst, and you could feel that in her very small yet very large presence. Now her family had appropriately coached her in proper Eucharistic etiquette and so she came forward, knelt on the cushions, and for the first time in her life put her hands forward to receive the bread. And when I placed the bread there it happened. Instead of the expected “Amen,” this quiet little girl stood up and shouted, ‘Thank you! Thank you!’ She might have even done a little spin, but I think I added that in my version of the story. Then she knelt back down and ate the bread. Then she returned quietly down the side aisle to her pew. And what happened at that service was that I got it some more. I understood more deeply that Eucharist is about gratitude; it’s about celebration, and hunger and fulfillment. I got that kids get some things we don’t and that age is neither a barrier nor a prerequisite to understanding things holy. It’s about Christ being here. In the bread. In the wide. Among us. In us. Because of us. Despite us. “I am the bread of Life,” he said.

I have more stories and you’ll get to hear a few more over the next few weeks. They are a some of the greatest joys of what I get to call “work.” You probably have stories too – stories of how somehow, somewhere, sometime this bread was like life to you, or gathering at this table renewed you, or swallowing the body helped you become the Body that gives life to the world. Within this bread there is something of holiness and eternity for us to chew on and swallow and take into ourselves. These are the gifts of God for the people of God.