

**Sermon preached by Jennifer L. Adams**

**At Grace Church, Holland on August 9, 2009**

**Proper 14, Year B: John 6:35, 41-51**

**“Bread of Life – II”**

Just on the odd chance that any of you missed either of the last two Sundays, I'm going to begin by bringing you up to speed on where we are in the lectionary readings. (If you *were* here the last two Sundays – points for you! – just hang in for a minute or two while we get everyone on board.) This morning is actually the third in a five week series of gospel readings from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. The series began two weeks ago with the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand, and last week and for the remainder of this series there was and is the theme of “bread of life.” “I am the bread of life,” Jesus said we heard it in the passage today, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” The Gospel of John, remember, is the only Gospel that does not contain a story about the Last Supper. There is no final meal with the disciples, no “words of institution” like Matthew, Mark and Luke include 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 blesses and breaks the bread 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. This chapter is about Eucharist for us it's 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.

And I told you last week that my primary way of talking about the Eucharist with you was going to be through stories, because while theological explanations can help us understand, it's stories that allow us to take a teaching into ourselves and make it our own. Last week I told you about a youth group Eucharist with the bread of hamburger buns and the altar of a flipped over canoe, the setting being the woods at the end of long and wet trip down the AuSable River. And then I told you about the little girl here at Grace who on the day she was baptized came forward for Eucharist and instead of receiving the bread with the customary and quiet ‘Amen’ stood up and shouted “Thank you! Thank you!” We talked about Eucharist coming out of ordinary things – Jesus on a flipped over canoe in a bun being passed among soaking wet teenagers. And about Eucharist being a celebration of thanksgiving and a joy and a response to our deep hunger regardless of our age. So this week I want to tell you about how sometimes Eucharist changes us; Eucharist as something that can motivate and transform us into new ways of being, new ministries, with new passions. Now the story I'm going to use is not my own. It's a powerful story that I heard at General Convention a few weeks ago. It's a story that was told by the Bishop of Wyoming in response to the question of why he was so passionately involved in issues of social justice and inclusion. Know as I tell this that Bruce Caldwell self-describes as “an elk hunting, horse-riding Bishop” who is still surprised that the current issues of our church matter in some very deep place in his own heart.

“Here's what happened to me” he told us. . . “Not long after I became Bishop of Wyoming I got news, news that a young man had been found outside of Laramie. This young man had been beaten severely and left to die” and the Bishop said “he was one of ours, an acolyte in one of our

parishes, a member of the campus Canterbury Club. His name was Matthew Shepherd.” Now you all probably remember Matthew’s story. It made national news because Matthew was killed because of his orientation in a blatant and very obvious act of hatred that in itself actually birthed various movements towards change. Well, Bishop Caldwell was called on to minister to Matthew’s family and then accepted the invitation to preside at the funeral and the Eucharist that was a part of that service. And that experience changed him: “There were protesters present” he told us (b/c there is a group that shows up at such funerals) “but there were others too,” he said, there were hundreds who came to remember and to mourn and to care for one another that day. “Crowds came and they kept coming. . . They were pierced, spiked, gay, straight, young – lots of young, and old too.” They were Episcopalian, Lutheran, Catholic, Unitarian, non-denominational and not-wanting-anything-to-do-with-organized-religion-whatsoever. But they came.

“And when it was time to receive communion,” the Bishop said, “I invited them to come and eat”. . .and to his surprise, they did, almost all of them did. “All these folks with their empty hands came forward to receive. . .” and he still talks about this with some astonishment in his voice. “I knew it was an absolutely holy moment of deep grace,” he said. “And I found myself asking myself why are they here? . . .Why are they here with their hands outstretched to us, after the way they have been treated?” He placed bread in their hands. And they ate. And in that moment Bruce Caldwell became committed to inviting, welcoming and filling all hands (and I would add hearts) with what he calls “the absolute love of God.”

So why *were* those people there? I want to sit with that question for a minute or two because I think the answer is in today’s passage. Why were they there? “Because God brought them,” Jesus said. It’s that simple. While the religious leaders were complaining among themselves in the middle of today’s passage regarding various theological issues Jesus responded with, “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away. . .” and then a little later added, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” In other words, if they are with Jesus it’s because God brought them, they wouldn’t be there if he hadn’t. So this really isn’t a gospel about who gets to eat and who doesn’t, in fact it would seem that Jesus in his life and ministry did just about everything he could to get the faithful unstuck from that particular question. The bread was never meant to be a barrier – it was meant to be life – sustenance, renewal, forgiveness, hope, community, Body, challenge, God.

So why did God do it that day in Wyoming? Why did God bring together that broad and odd group of people into a celebration of new life and Holy Eucharist? For the sake of the souls of the spiked and the pierced? Maybe. So that Matthew’s family could witness the amazing breadth of love and care that surrounded their son? Probably. For the church to see that it can be forgiven too? I think so. And maybe it was for all of those reasons and more. This story reminds me that there is power here in our sacramental actions, power that we can’t begin to understand or predict. The kind of overwhelming holiness that can open our hearts even when we think our hearts are doing just fine. The kind of holiness that can bring together the hands of elk hunting bishops and spiky-haired young men. The kind of holiness that can transform deep grief into hands-on participation in making the world and the church better, safer, more welcoming, more abundantly loving for all people.

Now we don’t see a whole lot of piercings or spikes or for that matter elk in this place, but we bring our own diversities and eccentricities and marginalities and when we hold our empty hands

forward, God feeds us. And we feed one another. According to this passage, if someone comes into the presence of Christ, it's because God made it happen. The least we can do is put the bread of life in *their* hands too, whoever the "they" may be. "The gifts of God for the people of God."

Amen.