

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 13  
RCL Lectionary, Year B  
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 / Psalm 78:23-29 / Ephesians 4:1-16 / John 6:24-35

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour  
Mill Valley, California

## Food for Our Craving

by **The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

It's not very often that I have a theological discussion with a stranger in Mill Valley. Most of the time, when it comes to matters of religion and spirituality – institutional and otherwise – people here keep pretty much to themselves. Except for those engaged in the regular life of a faith community such as ours, it's been my experience that religion is largely considered private on the street, a matter of such a personal nature that it is not to be discussed with strangers – let alone a stranger like me wearing a collar!

So I was surprised this past week by a rare moment when I was approached by a stranger who wanted to talk about religion. More to the point, he wanted to ask some of those hard, sticky questions about our faith tradition that even the fast faithful rarely ask. He wanted to know why we practiced as we did and why we held sacred a text – namely the Bible – that at times could be outrageous and awful. He wanted to know why Christians across the ages had sometimes done terrible things, both individually and corporately, in the name of God.

Short of quoting him the Nicene Creed, which I'm sure wouldn't have gotten me very far, I must admit I had a hard time answering his question at first. He wanted a summation of our faith and our way of being in community around God that was succinct, straightforward, and illuminating – a take-home nugget that would be at the same time inspiring and convicting. It was too easy – to resort to good stereotypical Anglican or Episcopal fashion: to tell him there are no simple answers; That we wrestle with these questions in community all the time. But that response would not satisfy his hunger; it was not food for his craving, and so he persisted further, and continued to press his question.

In our readings today, we return again this week to the theme of feeding. In this classic story from Exodus, the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness, kvetching – as is their wont, it seems – about the desolation of their lot. They put Moses in the hot seat – where he frequently finds himself caught between God and God's people – and, we recall in the language of today's Psalm, demand food for their craving. What follows is the great story of a huge flock of quail and manna from heaven, complete with careful instructions on when, where, and how the manna is to be collected each day.

It's sort of our ideal notion of grace, isn't it? In our hour of greatest need, we complain to God, ask for what we expect, and get what we want – complete with instructions and all.

Fast forward to the first century, and we get today's Gospel reading, a text that follows immediately on the heels of John's version of the feeding of the multitudes. Christ and his disciples, by both boat and means more miraculous, have journeyed back across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum. The people follow him, and end up asking questions of him in a rabbinical discourse containing some of the great mysteries of our faith. As their ancestors demanded of Moses, the people want to be fed – they want their ideal notion of grace met by this miracle worker, this modern-day Moses that they see in Jesus. They demand a sign. They want their hunger – spiritual and physical – satisfied. And Jesus responds in one of the great Johannine texts about Eucharist.

But most intriguing to me this day is the demand that prefaces the desire for a sign – a demand to know what the people must do to “perform the works of God.” What they appear to crave is a laundry list – a set of chores on how to be a faithful people living in God's household. Works are meant to be performed, after all. And how we perform is the ethical fulcrum upon which our salvation is supposed to turn, right? Perhaps we can earn that bread from heaven?

But Jesus simply answers them thus:

“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

For an ethicist and a bit of a performer like me, this isn't a very satisfying answer at first. But it is the answer around which, truly, our entire faith turns. And that is the answer of grace as found in Christ Jesus.

In my conversation this week as I was hard pressed to come up with a summary and simple response to the complexities of scriptural interpretation and the more sordid parts of Christian history, I was reminded by today's Gospel of Jesus' simple answer to a complex question. And that answer is the centrality of our faith, the Word of God in prayer, reading, and sacrament: Christ himself. Full stop.

In responding to the questions of how best to interpret our faith, I was reminded to remark on how we interpret everything – from our lives to our practices to our holiest writ – and that is through the grace of Jesus Christ. Through our relationship with this singular figure of our tradition, this person we revere day in and day out, week after week, year after year. This man we call Son of God and hold dear in our hearts, around whom we see the universe transformed.

As inspired as we might be by clever discourse, and erudite answers to life's most intractable questions, our deepest answer is not in intellect or words or even on the pages of a book. It's in the person of Jesus Christ, revealed among us by the Spirit of God, engaged with us in each moment down to every fiber of our being. Christ given for our deepest cravings, our greatest hopes, our most profound longings.

We are *Christians* after all, steeped in our Eucharistic tradition, remarking on bread and wine as body and blood, taking these elements in – remarking on this person who seems to us to vault the barriers of death, creed, language, and culture. This singular figure who utters out of the heart of our faith, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Who is bread broken for a world in need, manna from heaven, and who satisfies our deepest longing with the love of God. Love given to redeem all things.