

## ***Always More Room***

The Rev. Emily Given

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA

August 18, 2024

Pentecost 13, Proper 15, Year B

“Explain it to me like I’m a preschooler.”

People will sometimes say this when a complex concept needs to be broken down into its simplest form.

It’s a strange statement in many ways because most preschoolers I know can run circles around us as adults in their sense of openness and limitless holy imagination.

Before being called to the priesthood, I spent most of my life in the church, ministering to and with children, youth, and families. While serving in Dallas, a favorite was Pajama Prayers. We would gather in one of the chapels on Wednesday nights during Lent, dressed in our pajamas for an age-appropriate version of Compline (bedtime prayers), storytelling, and a snack.

Normally, I picked scripture that had a clear storyline since the span of ages was fairly large. Once, a colleague suggested something more abstract - “Let’s use the imagery of the Bread of Life since we were leading up to Holy Week,” they said. In order to honor the suggestion, I said, “Why not?”

All was going smoothly until one child asked, “... but what KIND of bread was Jesus?” At first I said something that was a bit of a non-answer, “Jesus is the BEST kind.” Then, being trained in a Montessori method of faith formation, I couldn’t let that answer go. I inquired, “I wonder what you think?”

The first answer was a little silly and sounded more like a question, “A hotdog bun?”

Then the brave voices started...

“I think my Jesus would have a cinnamon swirl.” (I love the use of “MY Jesus”)

A tiny human piped up with the definitive statement, “Jesus DEFINITELY isn’t the yucky bread with seeds and sticks in it. My mom always makes me eat that kind.”

And THEN their budding theological minds were sparked. One child said, “I think my Jesus is a bagel.” (Then there was a thoughtful pause as if something more needed to be said.) He continued, “because if you hold him up, there’s a hole for God to come through.”

Then someone else said, “I think Jesus is the kind of bread that you eat and eat, and it doesn’t make your belly hurt because there is always more room.”

Ahhhhh, yes. We can eat and eat and there is always more room for more Jesus. At that moment, I thought to myself, "That'll preach." I could just sit down and yield the floor to this inspired human!

That night, over a decade ago, made me think of the ongoing presence of bread in the Gospel readings for the last few weeks. It has been a summer of bread and we wonder what more can be said about it. John repeats things because he doesn't want us to miss them.

His Gospel differs from the others in many ways. There is no baby Jesus, nor is there an upper room narrative echoing the prayers we offer at the table during the Eucharist. In exchange, we are given "the Word made flesh" and "Living Bread come down from heaven." John gives us a whole countryside of people being fed instead of just a few friends gathered together for one last meal.

We can eat and eat and there is always more room, more bread, more Jesus. The Greek word John used for eat is closer to "gnaw." Not nibble and sip, but gnaw.

John's unique voice gets us to the place where this bread and wine far exceed one meal or the remembrance of a single moment. He uses the uncomfortable, fleshy form to signal to us the gift of the incarnation. "The world became flesh and moved in with us." The Word made flesh and lived in the middle of us. As I have said before, my favorite translation of this passage is, "He pitched a tent in the middle of us and lived."

Interestingly, John's passing reference to the upper room focuses on the foot washing, not the meal. Jesus, in all of his fleshy, human nature, came to us so that we might know more about how God's love can be made real in tangible ways. To teach. To serve. To model so that WE might also teach and serve and model what it means to be a follower of this Jesus. My Jesus. Your Jesus.

And yet today, we are given this scripture that shows some being outraged by perceived cannibalistic intentions. The scripture calls them "Jews," but a better way to think about them is as the first community of faith trying to navigate the shift in tradition and belief. What would they hold onto, and what would they let go of? Jesus was turning the teachings that even he followed upside down by being the unexpected fulfillment for those who accepted him as the Child of God. The Word made flesh.

And in all fairness to our first-century Jewish siblings, the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood should give us reason to pause. It should make us uncomfortable. It is a sacrifice that is both a comfort and a horror.

In using the images of body and blood, Jesus says that nothing is being held back from us. The very substance of who he is is ours. We need to do more than look upon Jesus and admire his life from a

distance. We must take Jesus, God in human form, INTO ourselves. The American theologian William Willimon calls our God “scandalously, intimately available to us.” Once we know this, we live forever. If we are going to be involved in a scandal, it should at least be related to how much Jesus loves us and how much we love Jesus in return. The depth of our love for Jesus should make others confused... maybe even concerned because it is so countercultural.

Living Bread. Fleishy God. The incarnation. Jesus is saying I am giving you my WHOLE self. Flesh and bone and heart. If we go back to the Greek again, the word is not just “give.” It is “hand over”. An intentional action. A willing surrender.

Peter Claver Ajer, a Ugandan New Testament scholar and seminary professor of mine, writes, “It is a switch from eating and drinking to believing in and coming to Jesus.” How we “must absorb his teaching, his character, his mind, and ways; must appropriate the virtue in him till his mind becomes our mind and his ways our ways; till we think somewhat as he would do if he were in our place, and can be and do what without him we could not be or do; and this because his power has passed into us and becomes our power.”

It’s about cultivating an intimacy with God. Living in a way that it is hard to see the beginning of one and the end of another. Again, it is a difficult way to live and will not be matched in our culture. Do it anyway. We hear this same counsel in the Letter to the Ephesians. Honestly, it makes me wonder, “what in the world was happening in Ephesus?”

And yet what sage advice in our time. Be careful how we are live, not because we are afraid of the wrath of God but because we might miss the goodness. Seeing life as this tremendous gift. Abiding in God. Which in the Christian sense means to be held... to be kept... and to dwell together. A beautiful and unparalleled sense of intimacy that cannot be matched.

Jesus tells the first community of believers, “I am true food and the true drink.” Jesus tells us the same thing. This bread is not the manna that came down and satisfied for a moment. This bread. This whole self gift of Jesus opens to us eternity. Wholeness and life forever.

My prayer for you is that you see Jesus just like that tiny pajama-clad prophet, who sees “your Jesus” as the source that you may you eat and eat and still have more room. May you gnaw on Jesus just as John suggests. May you be scandalous in your love and may you never be hungry again.

Amen.