

*A Sermon by the Ven. Patti Davis
Galilee Episcopal Church*

John 6:27-40
Evensong
March 2, 2008

“Lord, we are not yet willing to let you have your way with us. But Lord, grant that we may be willing to be made willing, through the grace of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.”¹

Jesus has just fed the five thousand with 5 barley loaves and two fish and some of the crowd has followed him, anxious to know if he offers anything besides some sleight-of-hand magic to temporarily satisfy their hunger and thirst. But like the woman at the well, it's not much more than that. It's really about getting what they can to be happy now, about feeding the physical hunger and thirst that is a constant element of life every day in a poor country. Like the Samaritan woman who only wants water enough to spare herself the daily trip to the well, they only want to stop laboring so hard, day after day, just to sustain life. But something happens. Perhaps they hear something in his talk of the bread of eternal life, because they ask, “What must we do to be doing the work of God?” Of course, they're trying to trade one kind of labor for another here because it's really a question about earning salvation, about getting it right so that God will approve. And Jesus' reply is clear: the only work that matters is giving oneself over to God, body and soul. Because, as hard as it is for us to grasp, believing is not another achievement, another certificate we can hang on the wall, but a disposition of mind and soul, a willingness to let God have his way with us, though we don't yet know what that might mean.

And the crowd is perceptive; they pick up on the depth of his challenge and back away verbally if not physically. They challenge Jesus to perform a sign, to do better than Moses with the manna. Read that part with sarcasm and you'll have the sense of it. And Jesus is clear once again, as though talking to some rather dense, stubborn children: both the manna and the deep soul hunger are from God. It's God who calls and God who provides and you need do nothing except be willing to let God have his way with you.

At the end of his life, almost everyone abandons Jesus and this is why. Because we do not want to give over our lives to God. We will put all our troubles up on the altar when we come to church and invite God to do something about them – and then grab them back before we head out the door, certain that our problems are ours and we must manage each and every one. We wake each morning with prayer but then make decisions all day long without a thought as to God's will for our lives. We speak our own minds, not the mind of Christ, and would defend to the death our right to do so. Like the crowd in this story, we are willing to let God have his way with us -- so long as it agrees with what we have in mind. Sometimes the most wonderful thing about the Bible stories is that they are so terribly human that we can forgive ourselves for being in that same company!

Perhaps you remember some years ago, the great power blackout in New York City. Through a combination of overloads and failures, much of the city went totally

¹ With thanks to the Rev. Bob Gilman for the prayer

dark. And people who were in the habit of coming home from work or school and closing the door behind them until morning, poured out of their pitch-black homes; people in apartments and brownstones and tenements, all out on the sidewalk, trying with their new-found neighbors to figure out what was going on. And in the midst of that deep darkness, a man who was an astronomer brought out a telescope, set it up on the sidewalk and pointed it at the night sky. And children young and old took turns looking through the lens at a sky they had never seen, strewn with stars and planets, a great wonder, there all the time, but only now visible. Because the astronomer knew what others didn't: that though the lights of the city obscured the awesome night sky, it was still there, bearing witness to the presence of God.

In our gospel story, Jesus is the astronomer, if you will, offering a lens through which we see the presence of God hidden in a loaf of bread. He uses bread to talk about a deeper hunger, inviting the crowd to see himself as that very bread, the power and presence of God to nourish and sustain. Because hidden in the bread is Jesus and hidden in Jesus is the only life worth having. Jesus addresses God's call on every life when he offers this bread, not to ease a body hunger but to satisfy a soul hunger. The problem of course is that, like manna, this is bread for a journey, not for a sit-down dinner. It is bread to strengthen and enable us to keep on, bread to put in our pockets for sustenance along the way. It is bread that contains all that we need, so that we can give ourselves over to the trip, knowing that the One who so often seems hidden is still present, though the city lights often keep us blind. Yet still we think that we need to lug around our life's baggage, just to be safe, instead of relying on this bread for the journey. Were we to trust God for the bread and the journey, we might discover that what has always been so dear to us has simply weighed us down, kept us looking at the sidewalk instead of the night sky.

And so we come to be reminded, in song and story, and to be fed with heavenly bread, bread which will change us and the way we see the world around us, if we will but let it. Yet we can refuse it and go our own way; in a thousand daily thoughts and actions go our own way, until we've settled for ordinary bread and have forgotten what that other hunger felt like, until we look at the night sky and see nothing but sky. Renowned German theologian Karl Rahner put it this way:

"The darkness is still with us, O Lord. You are still hidden and the world which you have made does not want to know you or receive you... You are still the hidden child in a world grown old... You are still obscured by the veils of this world's history, you are still destined not to be acknowledged in the scandal of your death on the cross... But I, O hidden Lord of all things, boldly affirm my faith in you. In confessing you, I take my stand with you... If I make this avowal of faith, it must pierce the depths of my heart like a sword, I must bend my knee before you, saying, 'I must alter my life.' I have still to become a Christian."²

"Lord, we are not yet willing to let you have your way with us. But Lord, grant that we may be willing to be made willing, through the grace of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen "

² Karl Rahner, Prayers for Meditation