

Sermon: August 9, 2009 – the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost John 6:35, 41-51
The Rev. Canon Bob Riegel

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.”

We are in the middle of at least five Sundays that talk about Jesus being the bread of life. Two Sundays ago we read about the feeding of the 5,000 with five small barley loaves and two fish. Last Sunday we read about crowds of people coming to Jesus, but only because they wanted to get more bread to eat. Today and next Sunday we have Jesus’ teachings about the bread from heaven. He says his flesh is bread and his body gives eternal life. Bread was such an essential to life that in every culture there are wonderful and different ways of making bread. And for several decades bread was a synonym for something we think is more essential to life – Money. “Hey, man gimme some bread.” Give me some money.

I had a childhood experience with bread. My sister and I decided to bake something – I think they were called Scotch Scones. In our kitchen we had one cabinet that contained nothing but a great bin of flour holding fifty or more pounds. Underneath was a sifter operated by a handle but it no longer worked. To get flour one had to pull the bin forward. It had a chain to keep the bin from coming forward too far but no one had told me that the chain was broken. Nor did they tell me that fifty pounds of flour had just been added. I pulled the bin forward, lost control and all the flour hit the floor. My sister was just getting a milk bottle out of the fridge and she was so startled that she dropped the quart of milk, which broke, and began mixing with the flour. What a dusty doughy mess. Never again was I invited to make anything in the kitchen, but I was still fascinated with bread. I watched and saw opened the little packages called yeast. When added to the dough like magic the bread began to grow. It was alive and became many times larger than an hour or two before. I wonder if children today see the wonder of a loaf or rolls rising. I wonder how many experience that wonderful smell of bread baking and a fresh

loaf being broken open and eaten. Bread was wonderful to sight and taste and smell. Bread was mysteriously alive. At least back then bread was on the table everyday for every meal. So it was natural that Jesus selected bread as the way we receive him and the mystery of eternal life. In most services we use unleavened bread, a bread without yeast. Perhaps somewhat like the matzo.

I used to grab a role or a slice of bread and begin eating it. My mother patiently taught me that bread or a role should be broken before eating. She did not tell me that breaking the bread at the table had something to do with breaking the bread at the Altar, as well Christ's body being broken upon the cross for our salvation. That's worth remembering both at the Altar and dinner table.

St. John began his Gospel account saying that the Word was God and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. We receive the Word of God through accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. We receive the Word of God, the love and forgiveness of God as we eat the Holy Bread of Communion. Christ is no less present in this Sacrament than he was in Jesus of Nazareth.

This week I came across a saying attributed to Queen Elizabeth the First. It affirms the important connection between Word and Sacrament. It also affirms her trust in Jesus saying that he is the bread of life.

**Christ was the Word that spake it.
He took the bread and break it;
And what his words did make it
That I believe and take it.**

Jesus not only taught us that he would be the bread of life for us to eat – he called us to feed and care for the poor. There is an absolute connection between the bread of heaven and the bread we share with others.

This morning (At the 10:00 service) the choir will sing an anthem you probably know well: Panis Angelicus written by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. The choir will sing it in Latin. The hymn says that the bread of angels becomes the bread of man. That bread is the real thing and puts an end to all symbols. It exclaims “O wondrous thing!” It then reminds us that the poor, the slave, and the humble may feed on their Lord.

What an important reminder today as we celebrate St. Lawrence Place, a healing place where we provide transitional housing for those who were homeless. St. Lawrence was a deacon of the church in the third century. The infant Church was under persecution and Lawrence was ordered to bring all the treasures of the Church to the emperor. Lawrence gathered up the homeless, the hungry, the sick, and brought them to the emperor saying these are the real treasures of the Church. And for doing that Lawrence was publicly burned to death.

The bread that came down from heaven gave his life to be our Savior. In the Last Supper he gave us bread and wine to be his Body and he is known to us today in the breaking of the bread. But if we really take in and follow the one who gave everything, we should realize that our way is not to gather and amass and hold on to everything we can. Our way, must be his way, generously giving from ourselves, so that others may be fed and housed and healed and freed.

Like the people around Jesus who wondered how Jesus could say, “I have come down from heaven,” many of us have trouble believing that in this Sacrament we receive the bread of heaven. How could heaven be, how could the Word made flesh really be in Columbia, South Carolina in a gymnasium on August 9th in this secular and scientific age?

But I insist that God, and the bread of heaven, and eternal life are realities here for us. God insists on being one with his creation. God insists on living in you and living in me so that we can be God to the world – so that we can generously and thankfully bring

God's food and grace and love to others. Today receive the Word made flesh. Today become in the world the Word made flesh.