



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

August 16, 2009

Proper 15B

By the Reverend Donna Barr

This is the third Sunday in a row that we read a discourse on the bread of life. As some have said, "we Episcopalians are what we eat." The one "who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life", says Jesus, "and I will raise him on the last day." Though we tend to identify "eternal life" as the promised reward following death, in John it begins in this life as a gift from Jesus. Eternal life in John is a present possession that reaches its fulfillment in total "abiding" with God; it is the life of faith, a kind of quality of life that those who follow Jesus will lead. People of faith participate in this life that is sustained by eating Jesus' flesh and blood.

Today I'd like to share with you one such life of faith. One follower who truly got the message as a priest placed a piece of bread in her mouth and she tasted the intimacy of God. Sara Miles writes of her conversion of faith in her stunning book, "Take This Bread." These are her words: "One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans – except that up until that moment I'd led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything. Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food – indeed, the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people.

And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I'd experienced. I started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruits and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where I'd first received the body of Christ. I organized new pantries all over the city to provide hundreds and hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week. Without committees or meetings or even an official telephone number, I recruited scores of volunteers and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars.

My new vocation didn't turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays, folding my hands in the pews, and declaring myself "saved." Nor did my volunteer church work mean talking kindly to poor folks and handing them the occasional sandwich from a sanctified distance. I had to trudge in the rain through housing projects; sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man; stick a battered woman's Magnum in a cookie tin in the trunk of my car. I had to struggle with my atheist family, my doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of my newfound church. I learned about the great American scandal of the politics of food, the economy of hunger, and rules of

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Established in 1847

210 North Main Street Versailles, KY 40383 859.873.3481 info@stjohnsky.com www.stjohnsky.com



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

August 16, 2009

money. I met thieves, child abusers, millionaires, day laborers, politicians, schizophrenics, gangsters, and bishops – all blown into my life through the restless power of a call to feed people, widening what I thought of as my “community” in ways that were exhilarating, confusing, often scary.

I stumbled into a radically inclusive faith centered on sacraments and action. What I found wasn't angels or going to church or trying to be “good” in a pious, idealized way. It wasn't about arguing a doctrine – the virgin birth, predestination, the sinfulness of homosexuality and divorce – or pledging blind allegiance to a denomination. I was, as the prophet said, hungry and thirsting for righteousness. I found it at the eternal and material core of Christianity: body, blood, bread, wine, poured out freely, shared by all. I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored.

Holy communion knocked me upside down and forced me to deal with the impossible reality of God. Then, as conversion continued, relentlessly challenging my assumptions about religion and politics and meaning, God forced me to deal with all kinds of people. In large ways and small, I wrestled with Christianity. Faith for me didn't provide a set of easy answers or certainties: It raised more questions than I was ever comfortable with. The bits and pieces of my past – family, work, war, love – came apart as I stumbled into church, then reassembled, through the works communion inspired me to do, into new life centered on feeding strangers: food and bodies, transformed. I wound up not in what church people call “a community of believers” – but in something huger and wilder than I had ever expected: the suffering, fractious, and unboundaried body of Christ.

It may seem crazy, at this point in history, to assert that any religion – much less Christianity, can be a force for connection, for healing, for love. It may be deluded to assert that people can still be fed with this ordinary yet mystical bread.

But this is my belief: at the heart of Christianity, is a power that continues to speak to and transform us. As I found to my surprise and alarm, it could speak even to me. What I hear and continue to hear, is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely. It proclaims against reason that the hungry be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and the unworthy, the screwed-up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same. It doesn't promise to solve or erase suffering but to transform it, pledging that by loving one another, even through pain, we will find more life. And it insists that by opening ourselves to strangers, the despised or frightened or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy, since, without exception, all people are one body; God's.”

Sara Miles has shared with us her story of faith as witnessed through the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. In a few moments we will all be invited to experience again God's present gift of himself to us. We are all welcomed to come, just as Sara Miles was that first day she held open

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Established in 1847

210 North Main Street Versailles, KY 40383 859.873.3481 info@stjohnsky.com www.stjohnsky.com



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

August 16, 2009

her hands to receive. It matters not our theology, our beliefs or unbelief, our doubts or our faith. What matters is that we come – that we open our hands and hearts to receive the gift of God! As our Psalmist says today.....Come taste and see the goodness of our Lord! *Amen*

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Established in 1847

210 North Main Street Versailles, KY 40383 859.873.3481 info@stjohnsky.com www.stjohnsky.com