

Into The Deep

Every year a theology professor, on the first day of class, asks the new students what they think theology is all about.

Hands go up: “It’s about religion!” “It’s about spirituality!” “It’s about the deeper meaning of life!”

To which the professor responds, each and every year: “No, theology is about everything.”

As you know, we are in our third of five Sundays ruminating on what it means for Jesus to be the Bread of Life.

Five Sundays, with lots of repetition, from the Gospel according to John.

This year we mostly hear from the Gospel according to Mark, with a few diversions into the Gospel of John along the way.

In a couple of weeks, we’ll be back with Mark pretty much for the rest of the year.

You can’t have two more different gospel writers.

Mark is action packed, moving from place to place, staying nowhere for very long – all underscored by the use of one word in Mark, a word he uses at least 3 or 4 million times (I only exaggerate slightly) – the word, as you know, is “immediately!”

“Immediately, Jesus goes there – immediately Jesus cures her – immediately Jesus leaves for another region.”

But just as Mark is a breathless telling of the story of Jesus in a story that moves far and wide; the Gospel according to old uncle

John is an invitation to slow down; to take a seat on that overstuffed chair here on the lanai; to pour a glass of cold iced tea; and to sit with old Uncle John as he packs his pipe with new tobacco and takes us not far and wide, but deep.

The bread that is Jesus, Uncle John tells us, is not something made of yeast, flour and water.

The bread that is Jesus is, like bread, the very stuff of life.

John knows this is not something one easily gets one's head around, much less one's heart around.

And so old Uncle John brings us with Nicodemus to that midnight encounter with Jesus when the question is "how can an old man be born a second time?"

He brings us to the well with the woman who has more husbands than she can count, who wonders "how can it be that the water you give cures thirst forever?"

Uncle John brings us to the temple precincts as the elders ask: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

And here we are today, asking: "How can Jesus be bread for the whole world?"

John invites us to see the world, to see our lives, with new eyes; eyes that slowly come to see that everything that is exists within and through and because of the Living God.

God doesn't live in our hearts; we live in the heart of God.

“Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father,” Jesus tells us today, “so whoever eats me will live because of me.”

Uncle John is saying that it is never enough to admire Jesus.

At the end of the day, it's not even enough to follow Jesus.

The invitation of God, who knows the number of hairs on your head; who is present at the birth and death of every sparrow; the invitation of this God is to consume Jesus; to take him in and make him a part of your own flesh and bone; part of your every cell; because in ways we cannot understand; but in ways we can sometimes glimpse; All that Is Exists in the only Reality that is Really Real; the Reality we call God.

Because we really do live and breath and have our being only in God, we can let go of worrying about food or shelter or clothing or retirement or layoffs or success or failure or life or death.

Not that this is an invitation to a “la dee la” life; nor is it a suggestion that if only you believe -- bad stuff won't happen to you or to those you love.

Uncle John isn't done taking us into the depths.

It is in the depths of forgiving the unforgivable; of loving even our enemies; of praying for those who wish us ill; of walking the extra mile; of feeding the hungry and visiting the sick; these are the depths where Jesus lives even today; these are the depths where we meet him face to face.

Jesus dies on a cross.

Jesus tells us today that he gives his flesh for the life of the world.

How many of you are struggling with rotten bosses at work or obstinate parents or children or husbands or wives or friends who have become unreasonable?

How many of you are coping with illness or death or loss?

So often we think of these things as tragedies, and they are; but we also often see them as events we wish could be avoided; events we wish would have never happened; events we wish could be erased; ignored; forgotten.

Yet this is the very place where Uncle John, in his quietly repetitive way, patiently explains what it means for Jesus to be the bread of life.

The way that Jesus gives us his flesh; the way that Jesus becomes bread for the whole world; is to be lifted up on the torture rack of the cross; and in that lifting up, making holy every heartbreak, every tragedy, every death that ever was and that ever will be.

Instead of avoiding or trying to control the pain that comes our way in life, the insight of St. John's gospel is that it is precisely in your pain, precisely in our darkest moments, that we are most securely held in the palm of the hand of He who made us; He who calls us each by name.

And there is this.

It is in the cracking open that we are brought to life.

So that the place where we most authentically meet, drink, and consume Jesus, is when we too hang from our own crosses.

This is a far cry from the world's values of fame, power and money.

Yet that very world, with all of its misguided values, dead end hopes, misdirected dreams – that very world, our world, is the world Jesus comes to liberate.

You and I my friends are the heralds of that freedom – we are the messengers of God's good news.

Jesus is the bread of life.

Whoever eats this bread lives forever, because forever is the province of God; and God has claimed us as his very own.

It was St. Augustine who told his congregation a long time ago, as they approached the communion rail; as they too struggled with the mystery of the bread of life:

“Receive what you are; become what you have received.”

May it be so for us as well this day.

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