

Trinity Church
July 26, 2009

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
RCL, Year B, Proper 12

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

God our Father, whose Son our Lord Jesus Christ in a wonderful Sacrament has left us a memorial of his passion: Grant us so to venerate the sacred mysteries of his Body and Blood, that we may ever perceive within ourselves the fruit of his redemption; who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Abraham Heschel said, "Religion is the art of learning to live in amazement." For those of us whose faith is firmly anchored in the Incarnational Stream of Christian Spirituality, the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, the feeding of the five thousand, relates to only one thing in our own faith experience: the wonderful Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood that Christ lavishes upon us. We live in awe and amazement that week in and week out, year after year, generation upon generation, Christ places in our hands and to our lips the life-giving abundance of his grace in Holy Communion with him. Christ feeds us, not because we are hungry – though we are; or deserving – we are not; or even because we ask – which we do; but because we are here, and because Christ loves us and invites us into himself.

Christ's life was just one small life, no more significant than five barley loaves and two small fish – what is one small life among so many? When that life, broken in such abundance of grace, is shared among us, every one of thousands is fed. And then we, the fragments left over, our souls are gathered, with those who believe from every corner of the earth, into that miraculous and amazing creation we call the church; twelve baskets full of God's kingdom come on earth as in heaven. One of the oldest of all Christian hymns, older perhaps even than John's Gospel, prays these words: "As grain once scattered on the hillsides was in this broken bread made one, so from all lands thy Church be gathered into thy kingdom by thy Son." Our life together in Christ is the learned art of amazement as today, once again, we break bread and share the cup and become Christ's Body, his holy church. What more is there to say about the sixth chapter of John? We are the five thousand fed with Bread of Heaven till we want no more.

The words of Thomas Aquinas' prayer that I used to begin this sermon haunted me this week as I prayed it in the context of today's homily. We are meant to "perceive within ourselves the fruit of his redemption made known to us in Holy Communion." I take this to mean to encounter the grace of Holy Communion amazingly lived out in the world around us. So, I thought to myself, let me think of some of the most extraordinary meals I have ever had, meals where Christ was amazingly present.

Years and years ago now, I was on the holy island of Iona with three English friends. Iona is the island off Scotland where St. Columba established his famous outpost of Christianity in the 500s. It was Sunday, we all went to church, received Communion, and then it was time for Sunday lunch. What we forgot was that it was the Sabbath in seriously Presbyterian Scotland – everything was closed down tight. No business done on the Sabbath. No place to eat, and we had nothing in our knapsacks. We inquired at a guesthouse. Meals for guests only who had paid the day before. We knocked at the door of the famous abbey, where the Iona Creed we sing was written. Meals for retreatants only. One more try at the island's only hotel. Could we pay tomorrow for a meal today? "Absolutely not," said the proprietor. "This is the Sabbath, the Lord's Day, all meals today are without price, freely given, and you are welcome to the Lord's feast." And so we sat down with all the other guests and tucked into leg of lamb and roasted potatoes

and mushy peas and a pint of ale – British Sunday lunch at its best. I have never forgotten this meal because there I finally understood what the feeding of the five thousand was all about. The Day of the Lord made amazingly real in the generous hospitality of a hotel proprietor. For a moment – for one meal – we were eating in God’s Kingdom, grace perceived within ourselves.

This is what Elisha experienced in Second Kings when he ordered the man to give his sacrifice of bread to the people to eat. “Thus says the Lord, ‘They shall eat and have bread left over.’ “

Just a year ago, our daughter Effie and her Ryan were married. In the evening there was a dinner, and toasting, and dancing. Family from all across the country, friends, strangers I had never met, but others knew them, Effie’s and Ryan’s friends from college and grad school and work. The band was especially good and everyone was up dancing, Debbie and I, Effie and Ryan, Will and his Martha, surrounded by the affection of friend and stranger alike. “This is it,” I thought as we danced. This is the feast of which Isaiah wrote, “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. The covering that is normally cast over us will be removed, the Lord will wipe away tears from our eyes, and the reproach of his people will be taken away. Lo, this is our God, we have waited for him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” There I was, alive with amazement that such grace could be so real, perceived within myself.

So, we stand again today in a Sabbath moment of amazement as we break bread without price, drink wine well refined on the lees. What we do today is what Jesus did at the Last Supper, what happened when the five thousand were fed, what happened when Isaiah saw the Divine banquet on the holy mountain, what happened when Elisha fed the hundred, what happened to me on Iona and at a wedding, what happens to you when you, in a moment of grace, perceive within yourselves that hospitality of grace that is the fruit of redemption Christ bestows so amazingly upon us, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.