

Trinity Church
August 2, 2009

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
RCL, Year B, Proper 13

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

Here is a prayer of a three-year-old this year during a Children's Center Chapel Service: "Lord, give me marshmallows before I get more upset. Amen."

The prayer of one of Trinity's TECC kids, who shall remain nameless, sounds almost like the prayer of those who after participating in the feeding of the five thousand, follow Jesus all the way around the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum and demand that he continue to feed them: "Sir, give us this bread always," they say; and might easily have added, "before we get even more upset." Some of those who experienced the miracle of the loaves and fishes were unable to see in it anything more than an event that met their physical need for food. They were fixated on their need for food, their craving. Give me marshmallows, and I want them now.

This response is frankly surprising. After all, what did they go out into the wilderness with Jesus to receive? Was it something for the body, or something for the soul? Surely, it was something for the soul. If we are upset, is it really marshmallows that we want, as soothing as the taste may be, or is it a resolution of our anxiety, which surely must come from a healed heart?

The rabbis understood the purpose of all the miracles given to the people, that they were an encounter in earthly things that opened the heart to the presence and grace of God that heals the soul. For them, the manna that God gave the people on their journey through the wilderness had to have a deeper significance than the physical sustaining of the people for their earthly journey. This bread from heaven, they said, this *panis angelicus* (bread of angels), is the outward physical experience of the spiritual gift of the law which God gave on Mount Sinai. The law of God comes not from mankind, but from God alone, and gives daily guidance to the soul and mind and heart of every Jew. One should go out every morning and gather one's daily bread (as Jesus called it), and in doing so, one should also gather the law of God, and digest it into the art of daily living for God's glory. Jesus makes this same distinction when he says, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the *true bread* from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." This is the bread that you should be craving.

This divine/human mix-up plagues us all, and gets us into spiritual trouble. When the disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus to ask him if he was the Messiah, Jesus is astonished. Do you not trust your own teacher? he observes. "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? They live in kings' houses. What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes! And I tell you, more than a prophet. John has come, as Isaiah said he would, to prepare the way for the Messiah, and he has done it. Go, tell John what you see and hear. All the signs of the Kingdom are done in me. I am the one he has proclaimed. Believe his message. It is from God come to heal the world." You see, we are not the first ones to have this divine/human mix-up. Moses' followers had it, the disciples of John had it, those five thousand who were fed had it, and we have it too.

In her book, *A Circle of Quiet*, that wonderful Episcopalian author, Madeleine L'Engle, realized that she had this problem as an author. "This is a new thought for me," she writes. "One cannot be humble and aware of oneself at the same time. Therefore, the act of creating (what I do every day as an author) – or painting a picture, singing a song, writing a story, even to the glory

of God, can be an act of *hubris* in which I confuse the outward thing and mistake it for the true thing that it is not. Humility is throwing oneself away in complete concentration on someone else." Complete concentration on Christ. Madeleine L'Engle prays, "God of all creativity, show me your face so that I can lose myself in your love and splendor."

This realization that Madeleine L'Engle had is exactly what John wants to teach us through his Gospel. It is not about bread. It is not about eating our fill of the loaves. It is not about food that perishes. It is not about us, our anxiety, our need for marshmallows. It is about Jesus, in whom and through whom we see God, and lose ourselves in his love and splendor, and there find life. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." This is the work that God is doing in me and through me, that you believe in him whom he has sent. Lose yourself in me, in my love, in my splendor, and live.

This is what John wants to teach us about Holy Communion as he experienced it, just as we do today. It is *panis angelicus*, bread of angels wayfaring, but it is not about the bread. It is about losing ourselves entirely in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is how we believe in him whom God has sent. Jesus is the bread of life, body *and* soul found in the love and splendor of God.

When you come to Holy and blessed Communion today, stretching out the hands of your heart to God, there is no need to be drawn into the divine/human mix-up. It is not you who shapes God into marshmallows lest you be more upset; it is God who shapes you. So pray along with Madeleine L'Engle. "I lose my heart and soul and body in you, O Christ. Show me, in your love and splendor, the face of God."