

Trinity Church  
August 9, 2009

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
RCL, Year B, Proper 14

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Gracious Lord, stir up in us the flame of that love which burned in the heart of your Son as he bore his passion, and let it burn in us to eternal life. Amen.*

Today's readings continue the image, so strong in John's Gospel, of Jesus as the bread of life. Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

So let me begin by talking about eating bread that gives eternal life. Food that carries us from death to life. Elijah was fleeing from the most wicked woman in Scripture, Jezebel, Ahab's Queen in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It's very clear that she's the one with all the power, and she has focused all of it on Elijah, to destroy him and his God, and to establish the worship of Baal in place of the worship of the One true God. Elijah, as I said, was fleeing from Jezebel south into the Sinai desert. He went a day's journey, and was exhausted. He used all of his human resources. He throws himself down under a tree to die. He begged God to take his life before Jezebel does, adding insult to injury. He fell asleep. An angel wakes him up, but in his dreaming, the angel feeds him bread and water, and he falls again into sleep. The angel kicks Elijah awake, and now shocked out of his dream world into this one, he finds real bread and water, and it sustains him on a journey all the way to Mount Sinai, where he will hear the still small voice of God.

The point is that Elijah's clever wit could not save him from Jezebel, his own strength could not carry him far enough away from her, the truth of his message did not protect him. What carried him out of certain death into eternal life was the food that only God can give. Angel food, that is the life of God carrying us to himself. Jesus says to his disciples that he is the bread that carried Elijah to Mt. Sinai. He is the living bread through which the eternal life of God wells up in us and God takes us to himself, where we may be still and know that God is God.

The point for us is clear. The things that we want to rely on to carry us into eternal life won't get us there. Our good deeds won't do it, our understanding won't do it, our goodness won't do it; even our faith in God through Christ won't do it. Only Christ can carry us forty days and forty nights and sustain us into eternal life. That is the only food worth having — Christ's undying affection for us. Wake up and eat it. It is prepared for you.

The second part of today's Gospel has to do with Jesus saying, "the bread which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." One of the great gifts of the Prayer Book is that in 1979, the breaking of the bread was restored as a distinct moment within the action of the Eucharist. We take it very seriously, and for good reason. The only way that we can receive Holy Communion is if we break the bread up into pieces. This is especially so when we use leavened bread, and consecrate a single loaf. The gift of eternal life can come to us only through the broken body of Christ on the cross — only through his death there for us; death dealing love and affection for us. We find eternal life broken open for us, not by Christ's great power and strength, but by his humility, weakness and sacrifice. By giving himself entirely away.

There is a belief stream within contemporary Christianity that says that if God really loves you, if your faith is strong enough, that you will be successful, that you will be rewarded with property,

power, position, and prestige as a sign of God's love for you. Likewise, if you and your congregation are right-believing, then it will grow and prosper, and people will flock to your witness. This belief stream is sometimes called the Prosperity Gospel, and was articulated in a little book entitled *The Prayer of Jabez*. Now, the Presiding Bishop got a little flak at the General Convention for calling the cult of individualism in faith a heresy, so perhaps I should color my words carefully, but this Gospel of Abundance is just plain wrong. There is no other way to talk about it. Christ's greatest strength was his weakness. His richest gift to us was his life, freely given on the cross. His radiance was his total dependency of God. Jesus never received the gift of worldly abundance as a blessing or sign of God's favor. The miracle of the bread, the feeding of the five thousand, was that the meager gift of a few loaves and fish fed all.

Those who have a job are blessed. Those who have lost their job are equally blessed and loved by God. The homeless man on the street is as much loved by God as the wealthiest among us. We are saved by small and insignificant things of the world that are revealed to be the priceless treasure and beauty of God. We are saved by the broken body of Christ that is for us the bread of eternal life.

So let me end with a Christian story from China, told by Linda Fang, that illustrates this essential and necessary truth about the gift of eternal life.

At the foot of a mountain lived a father and his three sons. They were a simple and loving family. The father noticed that travelers came from far and wide to climb the mountain, but they never returned. It was rumored that the mountain was made of gold and its streams flowed silver. The father warned the sons about the dangers of the mountain, but they climbed it anyway.

Along the way up the mountain, under a tree, sat a beggar, but the sons ignored him in their eagerness to ascend the mountain. One by one, the sons disappeared: one into a house of rich food, one into a house of fine wine, one into the gamblers' den where promises of vast wealth hung on the throw of the dice. Each became a slave to his desire and forgot home.

Meanwhile, the father was heartsick. He yearned for his lost sons. "I must climb the mountain. I must risk the dangers." The father searched the mountain. Indeed, the mountain was solid gold and the streams flowed silver, but he hardly noticed; he was so determined to find his sons. He failed to find them, but on his way down the mountain, he met the beggar and asked his advice. "The mountain will give your sons back only if you bring them something from their true home that will awaken your love in them." The father raced home and brought back a bowl of rice. He gave the beggar some in humble thanksgiving. He found his sons, one at a time, and carefully placed a grain of rice on the tongue of each. Each awoke to discover their foolishness and to embrace the love of their father. They returned home together to the simple and loving life that brought them happiness for ever.

That one small humble morsel is here for you today. May you be awakened to the eternal and humble sacrificial love that it conveys. Stir up in us the flame of that love which burns in the heart of your Son as he bore his passion, and let it burn in us to eternal life.