

Sermon: Pentecost 11

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Year B

1 Kings 19:4-8

Psalm 34:1-8

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 41-51

In preparing for this sermon, the last few weeks I've been thinking about Jesus' statement that he is the Bread of Life. Then I thought about bread and the long process that unfolds from the seed being planted, harvested, ground up, made into dough, baked and finally eaten. It seemed to me there might be a corresponding pattern between Jesus becoming the Bread of Life, the stages of the seed becoming bread, and the stages of spiritual growth. I had also been pondering the apparent lack of spiritual maturity in our culture, and what the obstacles might be that need to be overcome to get to the next stage of growth.

Author E. F. Schumacher, in his book *A Guide For the Perplexed*, says that there are three stages of developing consciousness represented by the three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom literature. Also, there are two intervals where help is needed to get from one stage to the next. The first stage, the Law, is the Torah which tells us right and wrong, how to relate to God and our neighbor, teaches us boundaries, gives us identity, and authority comes from outside of us. This is a time of conformity and usually takes up the first half of our life. Richard Rohr writes in *Dancing Standing Still*, "Schumacher makes it very clear that the movement from stage one to stage two is experienced as a major dying. If you are not trained in dying you won't go." The first stage is where most Christians spend their lives, unless people, experiences of suffering and loss, or other wake up calls sent by God break through our comfortable immaturity and we realize there is no life living in a rut.

The second stage in the Hebrew writings is the Prophets. These writings are by people God raised up to speak the truth to those in power who are oppressing the weak and helpless. In order to begin this stage, we have to develop a deeper inner life, be faithful in prayer, spend time in silence, begin to develop the inner authority necessary to break away from the herd and progress beyond just keeping the Law and seeking loopholes in the reward/punishment system. In the prophetic stage we begin to see what is wrong with the institutions and often become angry and critical. This is a time where we learn to balance the new insights with conventional thinking without overreacting. Here also, there is a temptation to stay put once we start to feel the tension of leaving dualistic either/or consciousness for the more inclusive gray areas of both/and consciousness.

However, once we get this far we cannot go back, even though going forward requires developing a painful awareness of our mixed motives and resistance to letting go, as Elijah felt in the wilderness when he asked God to just let him die since he was just like everyone else, because we have tasted the sweetness of God's love and mercy. At some point, we are transformed enough to go on to the next stage, symbolized by the Wisdom literature. Here we struggle with paradox, mystery, and learning to trust our developing inner authority.

As Rohr writes, "The Book of Job portrays a psyche finally mature enough to have faith in the form of darkness instead of light, whereas stage one insists upon total light and explanation as we see in fundamentalism today. Jesus represents the mature religious position where, finally, we have a person dancing between inner and outer authority, reaching a new unified field that can include darkness and light."

Looking at the stages of growth in terms of the grain of wheat, the first step is the planting of the seed and the growth of the grain to ripeness. The second step is the harvesting of the grain, winnowing it and grinding it to flour, making the dough, and mixing it with other ingredients. Baking the bread and breaking it and serving it to the hungry is the third step. In Jesus' life, he passed from the first stage to the second at

his baptism, his ministry was the prophetic stage, and his passion was the beginning of the third stage, which reached its culmination in the resurrection.

As Jesus' Parable of the Sower tells us, much of the seed does not survive to bear fruit, but is choked out by weeds, grows in rocky soil, or puts down shallow roots which cannot bear the hot sun. The fruit that does become ripe has gone as far as it can without outside help. The transition to the second stage is only accomplished when the grain is cut down, which is the inner experience of dying. The grain is then winnowed and ground into flour, along with countless other grains. Then it is rolled into dough by mixing in yeast, water and other ingredients, according to the baker's plan, something beyond the comprehension of normal first stage consciousness. The processed seed is now matured enough that it can pass into the third stage, where the dough is transformed in the baking process, by fire, which paradoxically, can turn the dough to black ash or bring forth a new creation, the bread. The finished loaf can now give life to those who eat, but only because the baker fulfilled the potential of the seed.

Now from the single grain's point of view, the whole bread making process probably looks like punishment, and the baker as an angry and cruel person. The grains might tend to think that the transformation from seed to bread should be made magically, in an instant, instead of having to go through a long difficult process. To clear up this confusion, Jesus came to earth and proclaimed he was the Bread of Life and through his life, ministry and teaching, showed us what God is like, goodness beyond our imaginings. As Richard Rohr has written, Jesus doesn't change God's mind about us, but our minds about God.

That said, how do we get to know for ourselves what God is like? Just reading the Bible or listening to television evangelists? Unfortunately, too many people have done that, and think they know all there is to know about God, and these people tend to have strong opinions and loud voices, and dominate the conversation. God is not so easily grasped. In fact the only way to know God is by progressively discarding all the images

we have of God and relearning all the things we think we know. We have to give up always being right, give up our privilege, our self-serving ways, our preferences, and our plan for our life. This is the dying the seed must undergo, because as long as we see ourselves as having anything to offer God we are still living in illusion. It is only when we have that breakthrough moment when we see everything is from God, its all gift, that the burden of our false self is lifted, and we can truly start to see that from now on God is co-creating with us, allowing us to participate in the divine will. Jesus, the Bread of Life, is becoming one flesh with us.

This is actually when heaven begins for us, right here on earth, in the present moment. God is not bound by time in any way, there is only NOW with God, and we are flowing in this life energy which will always be. However, this vision is not one we can hold on to, we only get occasional glimpses, but our faith keeps this hope alive. But once the dynamic energy of God has been shown to us, even while we seem to be in darkness, all alone, not knowing where we are going, we do not lose heart. Darkness is actually our safe haven, because we don't have the maturity to handle the brightness of God. Self-inflation, thinking we are somehow better and more loved by God, stops all progress and puts us back a few steps.

The slow revealing of the goodness and mercy of God comes only when we make room and empty ourselves to God, a trade heavily in our favor, though surprisingly hard for us to do. Divine grace makes the suffering and pain of giving up our trinkets a small price to pay for such a deeply satisfying joy in knowing we are unconditionally loved, with no trace of judgement. This revelation of God's absolute love and mercy cannot be detected by ordinary consciousness, it cannot be articulated in words, and cannot be packaged for sale or used and manipulated in any way. Even the early church and the authors of the Gospels written in the aftermath of the bitter war with Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, couldn't always completely believe God wasn't punishing the Jews for their failure to accept Jesus as Messiah, but loved them just as much. Jesus scandalized those who wanted to use violence to obtain justice, by

instead absorbing the injustice into himself on the cross, and transforming it into God's forgiveness and God's new life for the life of the world. As our reading from Ephesians says, "be imitators of God." Our path to knowing God lies in following Jesus' example. Amen.