“Give us the bread always”

A sermon preached at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH on August 5, 2018 by Assistant Rector Jessie G. Dodson

A few years ago, I was sitting in the back of the sanctuary of the church I attended at the time. I liked to sometimes sit in the back and meet the newcomers who often sat there, getting a lay of the land.

On this particular Sunday I was sitting with a newcomer who’d never been to a worship service with communion before. For all I know, he’d never been to any church before either. I remember the look of uncertainty, and maybe even a little panic, as people in front of us started to get up out of their seats and file to the front of the sanctuary for communion. Once it was our rows turn I motioned for him to follow me to the rail. As we shuffled forward, he tapped me on the shoulder.

“Yes?” I whispered back to him.

“I’m really not hungry right now,” He said, “I already ate breakfast.”

I turned around, trying to hide the huge smile that’d spread across my face.

“What?” I said.

“Oh no. This isn’t a full meal, just a piece of bread and sip of wine.”

“Oh,” he said, with a look of even more confusion.

Being a cradle Episcopalian, I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know about communion. Receiving the Eucharist as a small child is one of my first memories. Like so many kids, I couldn’t believe I’d lucked out to get a piece of yummy, homemade bread in the middle of this seemingly random gathering of friends and family.

I’ve been reminded again and again that it’s always helpful to have people like that newcomer who help me see our rituals through completely fresh eyes. He helped me see again what our sacrament of communion looks like from the outside, and what it means.

I think of that newcomer often, And I thought of him again as we’ve entered into a stretch of weeks where in our Gospel where Jesus will talk a lot about bread and hunger. Last week, our guest preacher led us through Jesus’ miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. This week, our assigned readings lingers over that same story a little longer, Picking up the events that came the next day. The story lingers in our readings, just as it lingers with the people who were present.
Some of those 5,000 people were looking for Jesus after he’d slipped away from the crowds. “Tell us more,” they said. “Show us more!” “Tell us more about how to follow you, and how to get more bread to eat.”

I recently read an article by my seminary dean Andrew McGowan about this story.¹ Along with leading the Episcopal seminary at Yale, Professor McGowan is a New Testament scholar who studies and writes about bread in the Bible. He opened my eyes to a part of this story that’s escaped me in the past. It’s an aspect, I’m embarrassed to admit, that’s pretty obvious. What he wrote is that the premise of this Gospel story is based on a shortage of food. This wouldn’t have been the kind of miracle it’d been if people weren’t hungry.

The people in our story needed more than a piece of bread, They needed the whole loaf. And while we might not serve full meals from our altars, The text tells us that Jesus gave as many loaves and fishes as the people wanted (John 6:11). They were fed until they were full.

This story is about people who are literally hungry. And that reality of hungry people persists, just as strongly, today. The Food Aid Foundation tells us that as many as 1 in 7 people today are hungry in world.²

1 in 7.
Many of these people are in developing countries, But many of them are here among us in Cleveland as well. The Greater Cleveland Food Bank published a survey that tells us that Cuyahoga county has the highest number of food-insecure people in the state. That is, people who don’t have access to the food they need. Our statistics for Northeast Ohio are worse here than average. Because here, 1 in 6 people struggle with hunger on a regular basis.³ This is a present problem, And it’s all around us.

Thankfully many churches, including ours, are involved in feeding ministries to address this need in our communities. When I lived in Connecticut, I worked with a local Episcopal Church in their feeding ministry. Different churches would volunteer to serve a simple lunch in the same location each week. It was often a chaotic scramble to get things ready. It almost never went according to plan.

² http://www.foodaidfoundation.org/world-hunger-statistics.html
³ https://www.greaterclevelandfoodbank.org/about/hunger-facts
But, like so many who’ve helped in ministries like this, I found that serving this meal changed the way I experienced worship on Sunday.

There was one particular moment when I noticed a shift happen for me. I was sitting in the back of another sanctuary, in a different church, watching as my fellow congregants filed to the front for communion. Typically, our process to get up to receive communion is fairly stream-lined one in churches, but we’d recently changed our “traffic pattern” for communion. And what resulted was a long, messy line of people uncomfortable with the change, and unsure of where they were supposed to be standing. We were shaken out of our comfort zones, and just trying to get to the altar rail.

As I sat in the back of the church that day staring at the line of people, I realized something. I realized just how similar this group of people at church looked to the line of people I saw standing at the food pantry to get their meals. There we were, completely helpless without the power of God, forming ourselves into lines to receive our portion of the body and blood of Christ. Much like the people in the food pantry, we desperately needed to be fed with the food of eternal life that would not go away.

Because, my friends, we are also hungry.

Some of us are literally hungry, unable to afford or find healthy food. And still more of us are spiritually and metaphorically hungry. We’re trying to feed the gnawing emptiness in us with a constant stream of busy-ness, filling every moment of silence with noise --- the radio, the TV, social media. We’re losing our ability to connect with not only God but with each other. And now we as a culture and a people are lonelier than ever.

Jesus has a name for this in our Gospel today. He calls this “working for the food that perishes.” And he tells us today, that we’re called to work “for the food that will endure.”

I wonder if that’s what we’re doing when we gather here for church? We’re here to learn how to live and work for the things in life that will endure. We’re here to admit our hunger, and admit we can’t fill this need on our own.

So we come here to church, perhaps for the first time, and perhaps for the hundredth, to form a line and walk up to the altar. Gathering around the simple symbols of bread and wine, carving out a small space for Jesus to enter our lives.
We pry open our eyes, as our Eucharistic prayers says, “to see God’s hand at work in the world about us.” (Book of Common Prayer, 372)
And we do this action to point each other back again and again to the Bread of Life that is Jesus.

**Movement 5: Conclusion**
When we do these rituals together – when we gather for communion,
We’re unified with a much larger portion of the body of Christ.
We’re unified – those who are new here, and those who’ve been here a long time.
We’re unified – those who have never had to give a thought to finding literal food to eat, and those who struggle with this on a regular basis.
And we’re unified – here in 2018 with the people from 2,000 years ago who said, “Please, give us this bread always” (John 6:34).
Our need and our request is the same:
Jesus, give us this bread that will give life to the world.
Give us this bread that will make us never hunger again.

Amen.