

**“The Image of Bread”**  
**9 Pentecost – Year B – Proper 13 – August 2, 2009**  
**Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ**

Well, here I am, back from my sabbatical, and one of my most favorite Gospels, John, provides us with insight and invitation to be a Christian. The readings today talk about three things: relationship; community; and, church building. Last week we heard the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000, now we hear him say that he is the bread of life. I hope you like this image of bread, because for the next three Sundays, it will be part of our focus. There are some interesting things here in the John’s Gospel. This is the first of seven statements of “I am” by Jesus.

Now I know I am just back, and it’s not fair to spring a Bible quiz on you ... but where in the Hebrew Scriptures do we hear the words “I am” used? Right, in Exodus! Moses goes up on the mountain and has his first encounter with God. At the end of their conversation he asks for God’s name. Just like Jesus, we don’t get a plain answer. God says, “I am.” Today we hear Jesus say, “I am.” They are the same! What is going on here is the language of self-revelation. Jesus is revealed to us. John contains seven such “I am” descriptions. Jesus is revealed as: bread; light; a door; the good shepherd; the Resurrection; the way; and, the true vine.

All of this is meant to help understand our relationship with Jesus by his self-revelation. Today, we hear that the crowd is seeking out Jesus, again. What do they want? They want another free lunch! They want to satisfy the craving of their stomach. But Jesus invites the crowd, his disciples, and us to move deeper. He invites us to find in him satisfaction for the soul! The crowd wanted their immediate needs met, but Jesus talks about a deeper satisfaction, he talks about soul food.

It is in this image of bread that we find a key to being a Christian ... a relationship with Christ! For me, bread calls up wonderful images. I love bread. I can make a meal out of bread alone. I remember my Grandmother baking her own bread. There was the kneading of the dough, the placing of it in a warm place with a damp towel overnight so it would rise, then the baking. I often managed to come back to the house from chores in time for the bread coming out of the oven! I would watch her take a towel and dump the bread out on racks to cool. When it was cool enough, she would cut me a two-inch end slice, smother it with butter and give it to me! It was deeply satisfying, the smell of the bread when I came in the kitchen, the taste of the warm bread in my mouth, the look of my grandmother’s smiling face ... it was soul food!

What we are talking about today is soul food. Think about all the times we get together to eat in a group. These are important times, aren’t they? There is Sunday brunch, the family dinner, reunions, wedding receptions, birthday parties, and funerals. There is the eighth sacrament in the Episcopal Church, coffee hour! And here we are, gathered in Church to feast at another meal, Holy Communion. Now that little wafer and the sip of wine are not enough to satisfy our physical hunger. No, this bit of bread and sip of wine point to how Jesus satisfies our souls.

We want fast food and a quick fix to satisfy our physical cravings. Jesus offers us himself; to sustain us and bring us a deeper satisfaction that is soul food. He provides us hope, faith, love, forgiveness, and more. We are called into relationship with Jesus to find more than just a meal. We find in him the true bread that holds a profound and lasting promise of life!

The next step is to think about what it means to be a community. This was the focus of much of my reading, experience and reflection on my sabbatical. I visited 12 different Episcopal Churches each Sunday. I went off on two retreats. In each case, I was looking for the essence of what it means to be a community. I looked to see how they welcomed strangers, the nature of the liturgy and preaching, and how they interacted with the

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communities around them. Sadly, I was disappointed in most of what I encountered and the lack of welcome that I received. Only three of the many churches were places I would want to become part of their community.

Community has to do with belonging first of all. Everyone wants to belong ... everyone wants to be part of something. Before belief can take root, we need a community that we can be part of so that belief will be supported. There is a desperate search for community ... look at how Facebook, Twitter, texting and the computer are filled with attempts for community. The only problem with these sites is too often they are shallow or illusionary. We still need human contact ... you can't get a physical hug on the computer!

People are looking for comfort. People are looking for that presence, which I call God that brings reassurance and affirmation. We want comfort ... you know, like comfort food. What is it that makes you feel satisfied, comfortable, at ease? For many of special food maybe bread, its some chocolate, or Chinese food, or us ... well ... you fill in the blank here! It makes us feel better. I think this is what community is all about. We want to be part of it because of the comfort and reassurance it gives us. I see this taking place in families, in monastic communities like Holy Cross and St. John the Baptist. I see this at the root of earlier Celtic Christian communities.

It's in these communities that we find peace, love, forgiveness, hope and more. For us as Christians, this is what Jesus is about when he says he is the true bread ... he is the one that provides enough to satisfy our soul! We're reminded of this in the community that gathers each Sunday here for Holy Communion. It is one of the goals that we are called to be about as a Christian Community. Community is vital to our very existence ... it provides nurture and sustains us. This is the type of community that Jesus calls us to be part of and to expand to include others.

After relationship and community, then we are ready for the next step ... to build up the Body of Christ. That is what Ephesians is talking about this morning, and this is where I will end today. I visited 12 different Episcopal churches this sabbatical. I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that more than half of them are not doing a good job of welcoming others. Too often we remain in our little clicks, we don't welcome ... or even acknowledge visitors in our midst. I saw so much transition when I visited these places. Too many of these churches are on the decline ... and I doubt they will survive well.

The good news is that this doesn't have to be the way. There were those exceptions that gave me hope. These were the churches where Diane and I, the visitors, were welcomed and invited to be part of the community. There are churches looking to reach out into the neighborhoods and bring hope and support. These are the places that are building up the church ... and this is the place I think we are moving towards at Grace. Relationship with Jesus, a community of faith, and building up the Church ... these are the things that we are called to be as Christians. If we want to live into the reassurance, the hope, the life that God has to offer us, then we have to feed on the true bread ... that which Jesus offers us.

Each time you sit down at a meal, think about what the bread represents to us. It is more than the basket of food at the beginning of the meal to satisfy us until the main course comes. Bread reminds us of the gift of Jesus, the promise of God, and the community that we are part of in this place. Remember and celebrate each time you see bread. Look for the way to deepen your relationship with Jesus, to be more a part of the Church community and then to work to build up the Church. When we do, we are living into what the Gospel of John hints at ... the true bread from heaven!