

The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, October 3, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 16:2-15; John 6:22-40.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Picture the scene? Jesus and a great crowd. Just the day before, Jesus had fed that crowd - 5000 people - with five loaves and two fish. And, now, they're back looking for Jesus. And to that crowd Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, you're looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." "You're looking for me", Jesus says, "for the wrong reasons. I've come to give you something more important than bread. I've come to give you myself."

People are still looking for Jesus. We come to church looking for him. And Jesus is here! Jesus is really here! The Bread and the Wine are signs of his presence. Signs! We're not here simply to remember a man who lived 2000 years ago. No! He's here! The Risen Christ is really present. This Bread and Wine are signs of his presence. So what is it that we're hoping to get from the Risen Christ when we come looking for him; particularly when we come to receive the Bread and the Wine, the signs of his presence?

We often come looking for Jesus with a different agenda than what he has. We come hoping to get one thing. He wants to give us something else. Popular piety paints a picture of Jesus as a motivational speaker of great power, a giver of good advice, a preacher of self-help religion and self-esteem. A person leaving a worship service told a friend, "I go to church because it makes me feel better." For many people, church, is a kind of therapy and Jesus, a divine psychotherapist. Some people come to church looking for Jesus to give practical advice-- 12 steps to

a happy marriage. Five principles how to raise your kids. Four spiritual laws to live a Spirit filled life. And the principles and the laws and the steps may be good and helpful. But Jesus is here to give us something more enduring than fleeting feelings, information and practical advice. The Risen Christ is here this morning to give himself to us.

"Do not work for the food that perishes" he says to us who come looking for him. "Work rather for that which endures for eternal life." Could there be a more appropriate word to us modern workaholic Americans? We put so much effort into working for things that don't last? We study hard in school to get a good job and then, maybe, get laid off. We work hard to earn money, not only for necessities, but for a few luxuries. Many of us work two jobs to earn money to buy things that we don't need and that will not last.

Does anything have lasting value? Of course, we do have to work, to earn money, to pay the mortgage and buy food. But the house gets old and needs constant repairs, our electronic toys become obsolete, moth and rust consume our treasures and thieves break in and steal. These things we work so hard for don't last. The things that most of us pay the closest attention to, simply won't last. They're so ephemeral. And then, worst of all, no matter how hard we work to turn back the years, we grow old and die. "Do not work for the food that perishes," Jesus says. "Work for what's going to endure." "Don't put a lot of effort into something that's not going to last very long."

But what does endure? When the crowd asked, "What must we do to perform

the works of God?" it was just another way of asking what must we do to perform something of lasting value? We preachers are all too willing to quickly tell you what to do. Go to church! Read the Bible! Pray daily! Go to Sunday School! Help work with the youth! Give generously! Sing in the choir! Teach Sunday School! Help with the Apple Festival! Support the CROP walk! Get involved in the community. Surely, those things have enduring value.

But Jesus mentioned none of them. "This is the work of God," Jesus says, "that you believe in him whom he has sent." Well, you say, if all we have to do is believe, there'd be no youth workers. No one would help with the Apple Festival. No one would pledge money to the budget. No one would come to Sunday School and Church. No one would pray or read the Bible. 80% of the people in the United States already believe that Jesus is the Son of God and Divine but we're still one of the most violent countries in the world and our nation is plagued by drug addiction, disintegrated families, and racism. What do you mean, Jesus, "Believe in him who God has sent." What good does believing do? We need action, not belief.

But what does it mean to believe? We can talk about believing in Jesus only by using analogies. Believing in Jesus, is like the prodigal son coming home broken, trusting that his father will accept him back, if only as a servant. Believing in him, the prophet Hosea said, is like an unfaithful wife returning to her husband, hoping and trusting, that he'll not only receive her back, ^{but welcome her and delight in her.} Believing in him, Jesus said, is like responding to an invitation to a feast given by a wealthy landholder whom we've heard of, but don't know, as yet, personally. Faith is acting like God forgives

and accepts us as we are even when we feel worthless and distant from God.

That's something like what faith is.

In a few moments the risen Christ will invite us to come forward to receive the bread and wine. If we don't come believing in Jesus, we'll receive just bread and wine, something that can never satisfy our hunger. But when we come in faith to receive the sacrament, we come to the Risen Lord who will meet our deepest hungers. When we look at that bread and wine, believing in Christ, we see, not just bread and wine, but Christ stretching out his arms to embrace us. Jesus invites us to come, not simply to receive a bite of bread and a sip of wine, but to receive him. He gives us, not simply bread, he gives us himself. He came down from heaven 2000 years ago, to do the will of his Father. He comes down from heaven this morning and gives himself to us so that he might do the will of his Father in and through us.

Don't come just to receive bread and wine! Come to receive Jesus! Come to receive eternal life! Come trusting that he'll never drive you away. Come trusting that the Spirit of the Risen Christ will live in you and show you things that you can do in this life which will have eternal significance.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.