

Pentecost 12, Year B

August 11, 2024

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence

1 Kings 19:4-8

Psalm 34:1-8

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 41-51

Years ago, I heard a story about communion bread that has made me chuckle every time I think about it. The story goes that the service had started, hymns had been sung, sermon had been preached and bread and wine had been blessed. As the gifts of God for the people of God were to be given to the people of God, the priest realized that she was going to run out of bread. The crowd was much larger than normal, and the altar guild had not anticipated this size of a crowd when they portioned out the bread and wine during setup for the service. This particular parish, like we use at our 9am service, served pita bread, and the priest instructed the deacon to take some pita from the freezer where it was stored, warm it up in the microwave, and return with it. The priest would bless the bread, and the serving of communion would carry on then as normal. The deacon did as instructed, returned the thawed pita bread, the priest blessed it, and continued the administration. The next person in line was a child who, upon receiving a piece of bread in his hands, looked up at the priest in horror and said "He's still warm!"

I couldn't resist telling this story on this day when we get our third week in a row of texts from Scripture on bread. And we are not done after today. There are still two more weeks of carb loaded Gospel texts for us to sink our teeth into, as it were. And with two more weeks to go on the topic of bread, I don't want to solely focus on that today.

Very rarely do the assigned texts in the lectionary line up so perfectly with an obvious theme that runs throughout all the readings, and so I want to us to take a deep dive into the theme that is clear today: Transformation.

In the Old Testament, we meet up with Elijah who is just plain down. We might even say exhausted. He says, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors. But why is Elijah so worn down? What brings him to the words "It is enough"? You see, before we pick up with him in this morning's text, Elijah had spent days praying for God to reveal God's self as the only and true god by destroying the local false god named Baal. And Elijah's prayers had worked. In a dramatic display of fire and light, God had destroyed the altar of Baal, showing God's might and rewarding Elijah for his faithfulness. But this act of power did not accomplish what Elijah had hoped. It only angered the local queen, who, after the incident, issued a decree that Elijah would pay for his behavior with his life. And so we get a worn down, burned out, depressed, despondent Elijah under a broom tree begging God to end his life. For him, death would be the preferable option. But God does not listen to Elijah's request. As God does, God answers a despondent, depressed, burned-out wish for death with.... life. God answers exhaustion with bread and water. God gives Elijah what he needs by

transforming his bone-aching tiredness into vitality. This encounter with God through bread and water transformed Elijah's mind and body and gave him the nerve to stand up and journey on.

In the New Testament, we get a different angle of transformation. In the life of Elijah, God had brought about the transformation. In our New Testament reading, we see that transformation is also something we enact in our lives as Christians. Paul tells the Church in Ephesus to put away falsehoods and speak truth to one another, for we are all One in Christ. He says that thieves must stop stealing, and that those who have needs must be taken care of. He tells them to refrain from speaking evil to and about each other, to build up each other in love. For it is in this way of living- speaking truth, sharing what we have, and building each other up- it is in this way that we form authentic community. It is in transforming how we live our very lives that we see each other as one in Christ.

Then in John's Gospel, we see how these two ways of transformation come together in the person of Jesus. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." We see in this one sentence, the formula, if you will, for transformation. Lasting transformation involves two parts- God's giving of God's self to us and our giving of ourselves to God. We come to God, and God comes to us. We move and God moves. We enter the Divine Dance, as theologian Richard Rohr has defined this relationship, and we are transformed. Where we were hungry before, we are now full. Where we were thirsty before, our thirst is now quenched.

And because God is always going above and beyond to convince our doubt-prone minds to follow, Jesus ups the ante. Jesus says, "Believe in me, and I won't only feed your body with bread, I will feed your soul with the Bread of Life." In this spiritual bread, God offers us life beyond the lives we live on this earth. In the Bread of life, we are given the gift of eternal life.

So how do we enter into this Divine Dance where we find the gift of eternal life? There are many ways. But one very big one is what we are doing right here and now. Notice, we don't just walk through the door on Sunday mornings, process to the altar, receive the Bread of Life, and go home. Before we receive God made known to us in bread and wine, what do we do? We offer our praise to God through song and the reading of Scripture. We confess our faith. We confess our sins. In all of these actions, we are drawing close to God so that God draws close to us. Especially in our Confession of Sin, we acknowledge our shortcomings and our need for God's love to constantly refresh us and love us into wholeness. There's a great line in the Rite 1 version of the Eucharistic prayer, something that is not heard often these days: "And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord ourselves, our souls, and bodies." In the very prayer that the priest prays to transform the ordinary bread into the Bread of Life, we also offer our selves, our souls, and our bodies. Our participation in this Divine Dance is none the more present than in our action of coming to this altar to receive God's self in bread and wine. It is in this action that transformation happens. We come to God and God comes to us. When we are depressed or burned out like Elijah, God comes to us here. When we need strength to transform our own lives, to speak truth, to share what we have, to build one another up, God comes to us here.

Thanks be to God for God's feeding us and loving us and transforming us. May we go from this place to do the same for those in need in God's name. Amen.