

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

Psalm 51:1-13

Ephesians 4:1-16

John 6:24-35

Learning is a truly exhilarating feeling. I don't mean memorizing facts. There's nothing particularly exciting about that. But understanding how and why something works the way it does. Now that's a natural high!! And you know that you have truly learned a concept if you can adequately explain it to someone else so that they can understand it, too! That's a feeling that keeps dedicated teachers and professors in the classroom when the paycheck alone certainly wouldn't. But there are some things that I just know for certain that I couldn't explain in a million years. One of those things is that the sun comes up every morning and goes down every night. Now I know the mechanics of that, but I have absolutely no idea why that happens or how that happens...I just know for certain that it does. I have experienced it...not once or twice, but every day of my life. I suspect you have, too!

So what can experience tell us about our Gospel reading this morning? We began last week in the sixth chapter of John with the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. That began our five week look at Jesus' revelation of himself as the bread of life. It's a difficult metaphor to try to understand. In this morning's Gospel reading we find the crowds searching for Jesus after he has joined his disciples on their boat in the storm ravaged Sea of Galilee. The crowd figures out that Jesus has gone back to Capernaum, the little town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that serves as Jesus' home base. The crowd has had its fill of bread and fish and wants more from Jesus. But what more does it want? He escaped their attempt to seize him and make him king. When he faces them now he tells them not to work for the food that perishes but for the bread that endures for eternal life which Jesus will give them.

Like us, this crowd has little idea what 'bread that endures for eternal life' means. They don't get it. They didn't get it when Jesus talked about the temple (2:19-21): "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body." We can have twenty-twenty vision in hindsight. We can see so easily Jesus' metaphorical message when we know the rest of the story. And Nicodemus struggled to understand the meaning of 'new birth.' (3:3-4) "Jesus answered him, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'" Nicodemus just didn't get it. The metaphor was beyond him. He was

thinking, as we so often do, in literal terms. And when Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well and engaged her in conversation over a request from him for a drink of water,(4:13-14) Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” She asked for that water, but she just didn’t understand what Jesus was talking about. She just didn’t get it.

Jesus knows the crowd doesn’t get it. He knows they are looking for him because they want another regular meal. That’s the wrong reason to be looking for him. He has so much more to offer them than just another regular meal. They don’t understand the metaphor. And maybe we don’t either. When Jesus tells them not to work for the food that perishes, but work for the food that endures for eternal life,” they ask immediately, “What must we do to perform the work of God?” The key verse in this entire passage is Jesus’ answer to them in verse 29: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him who he has sent.”

Now the crowd wants a sign so that Jesus can prove to them that he is the one that God has sent. But they’ve already seen one of the most spectacular signs that Jesus performs...the feeding of the multitude! The crowd immediately goes back in history to the time when they were being led by Moses through the wilderness and God provided the daily manna to keep them alive. Jesus reminds them that it wasn’t Moses who gave them bread from heaven. It was God who gives the true bread from heaven. And Jesus identifies himself as the true bread from heaven. The crowd has faith in their vision of the Messiah, but not in this man they see before them. Do we really understand what Jesus meant when he referred to himself as the Bread of Heaven? If we think we do, can we explain it to someone else?

Jesus doesn’t continue to explain. But the Gospel of John, the most incarnational of the Gospels challenges us to reframe our notions of what it means to be spiritual. You’ll remember that the Gospel of John is the one gospel of the four that emphasizes the divinity of Jesus rather than his humanity. What we are presented with in this story is the incarnation of God standing before this crowd of disbelievers who have just been literally fed by the one that God has sent. Despite the fact that they have witnessed and benefitted from one of the most powerful signs that Jesus ever does, they don’t get it. They can’t see that Jesus is actually the one that God has sent. The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is the melding of spiritual reality with the limitations of earthly existence. Spirituality has become incarnate! Think about that for a minute. It borders on blasphemy for any of us to think we can explain this better than Jesus. The chances are that we just don’t get it. But we try...and all of us seek to understand what Jesus as the Bread of Life really means.

And when the church who is following this one who is the Bread of Life wants to get spiritual, when we want to feed our spirituality, we gather around a table and we eat bread and we drink

wine. And when we do so, we do so in remembrance of the incarnational God who came to us, who lived with us, who taught us, who modelled for us, who showed us how we should live and honor God and who loved us enough to die for us...the One who continues to be with us.

Everything Jesus taught us was counterintuitive. All of it goes against our human nature. It is countercultural. All of it goes against what we believe about how cultures are organized and operate. All that he asks us to do is difficult. These are the truths that Jesus revealed to us.

Faith is not just clarity of fact or belief in a set of propositions. Faith comes about through our experiences and encounters with the one who identified himself as the way, the truth and the life. The one who speaks to us in this metaphorical way is the one who desires not only that we think about him, but that we feed on him...we ingest him...we make him part of us. We take in his spirituality to feed our own. This intense connection with Jesus may just be our gateway to eternal life.

This passage of scripture is not one that is to be explained, but one that is to be experienced in the Holy Eucharist. To be sustained by Jesus is more valuable than being able to understand him. Our intimacy with him...our encounters with him...are far more powerful and life-giving than any thesis we could concoct about him intellectually. Jesus is not a cerebral exercise. Jesus is an experience...an experience to be savored like a fine meal. You don't need to have the recipe for the meal or know how to cook the meal or even know all the ingredients of the meal in order to be nourished by it. And when we gather around that table, we nourish our spirituality through him...the incarnation of the spirituality of God.

Neither do you need to 'get it' when it comes to Jesus. We 'get it' as a gift from God. We may never 'get it' in this life with our limited understanding of how things work. Just because we don't completely understand how it works or we can't explain it to someone else so that they understand it, doesn't mean that it isn't real. Our experience tells us otherwise. Sometimes it takes time to convince us of our own experiences. It takes a certain humility and openness to put our faith in what we cannot define. And it takes a trust in God who always has and always will love and provide for us. That faith and that trust is something that God gives to us, just as he gave Jesus himself to us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

