

"THE ORDINARY GOD"

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 130 ~ Ephesians 4:25-5:2 ~ John 6:35, 41-51

August 8, 2021

We take our food very seriously. Dining is one of the most intimate and vulnerable moments of our day. The table is a place of nourishment and nurture, of celebration and satisfaction. It is a gathering place, for family and community, for friendship and fellowship, for trust and connection.

But it can also be the place that shows us where our relationships have ruptured, where the fault lines lie, where walls have been built between us that we cannot seem to surmount.

We've all had some wonderful meals where the food ... good old home cooking ... even bad old home cooking ... was simply a means to the joy we shared with our companions. Dining with family or with friends, we have all felt the joy of table fellowship.

My parents were reared during the Depression, and the one rule at our family dinner table was that food was not to be wasted. No matter how long it took, my sister, brother and I were going to clean our plates. Well, that was fine for my sister...she loved every vegetable that God ever made. But my brother and I would still be at the table, long after everyone else had finished, staring at our cauliflower and beets.

As a child, I couldn't think of any thing worse than a plate of cold vegetables staring back at me. As an adult, there have been a few meals, with far better cuisine, that were much more difficult to endure ... when... no matter how delicious the food ... I felt alone and miserable, disconnected and divided from those who were with me. Maybe you have too.

The table is a holy place, and there is something mystical about the way it has of exposing closeness or distance in our relationships. The same is true of the Lord's table.

The Gospel of John does not have the story of the last supper like the other three gospels. John narrates no story of Jesus eating a final meal with his disciples. Instead, he makes the feeding of the five thousand the occasion for Jesus' teaching about communion. For four weeks the lectionary doles out the long story in pieces as a part of our Sunday morning scripture feeding. But it's important to understand the flow of the whole story. Jesus feeds the five thousand, and the people are amazed. They follow him across the lake, wanting him to do it again. Jesus tries to teach them about the Bread of Heaven instead.

A typical pattern in John's gospels is Jesus using mundane objects and events of everyday life to point towards the ultimate and eternal. In chapter three Jesus uses birth to point Nicodemus to the "new birth." In chapter four he uses water to point the woman at the well to the "living water." Here he uses bread to point the people towards the "bread of life."

Bread was freshly baked every day. It was not something that was stored or kept for long periods of time. It was provided ... it was given ... and it was eaten ... in a similar way to the story in which manna appeared in the desert.

In today's gospel they sort of teased back and forth awhile about manna and bread and Jesus feeding them again. Jesus was speaking metaphorically, but they were literalists. Jesus meant the living bread of God's word, but they wanted the actual bread again. Jesus wanted them to be hungry for the right thing. Finally, he told them: *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* This confused them, so he made it even more plain:

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. (John 6:48-51).

Jesus called upon the crowd to look beyond their desire for miracles ... beyond their desire for proof of God's love for them ... and to recognize that the true miracle was God's spiritual nourishment ... nourishment that was freely given, received in abundance. Yet, the crowd asked Jesus for miracles. *"What sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?"*

I used to think in terms of "if only" ... If only, just one time – I could hear God's definitive voice ... talking to me. Just one time ... just to me. Then I would believe without reservation ... then I wouldn't have any doubt ... then I could speak from personal experience.

If only ... just one time ... I could hear God's crystal-clear voice ... why, I'd tell it to the ends of the earth! And those around me who knew me well, those who trusted and loved me, they would know I was telling the truth and would believe. And then they could tell their friends and so on, and so on.

But I have come to realize that the language of God is the experience God writes into our lives. God does not speak to us through séances, and the most important things that God wants to say to us are not given in extraordinary mystical visions. The God of the incarnation has real flesh on earth and speaks to us in the bread and butter of our lives, through things that have skin – historical circumstances, our families, our neighbors, our friends, our enemies, our church.

I know that when I open myself up to the Spirit, when I open myself wide, and live in all the abundance that God provides, I can hear God calling me loud and clear! I can hear God calling

me through you and you, and through the wind, through the birds ... through the homeless on our streets, through the laughter of our children, through the sick and through the healthy, and through the dying and the living.

Through the people I love, and those I only like, and through people I don't like, and *especially* sometimes through the people I don't like! To all those who yearn to hear ... God speaks ... through all *things* and through all *beings*. God speaks ... from *all* that is touched by the grace of God ... God is still speaking to us!

Frederick Buechner once said, "God's grace comes to us as a surprise, because if we knew it was coming, we would jump out of the way." Those words were certainly true for me as I spent a summer as a chaplain at Christ Hospital in Chicago. If I had known what I would be facing I don't think I would ever have walked through the door.

Christ Hospital is a level one trauma center in a part of Chicago where gun violence is the number one cause of death in people under age thirty. Part of my job was to try to offer God's comfort to children who had lost their parents and to parents who had lost their children. It was not easy work, yet I came from that experience totally convinced that the bread of life is there for us, in every circumstance.

One of my patients, Daniel, was dying of AIDS. When I introduced myself to him, and told him I was a chaplain, he was very hostile toward me. "You know, I don't believe in God," he said proudly that first day we met. So, I told him that his disbelief in God didn't really matter to me. He seemed fairly amazed at that ... I think I took some of the wind out of his atheist sails. I spent a lot of time with him and continued to see him throughout his last days.

Now, if you asked Daniel about our conversations, he would say that we never mentioned God. According to my account, God is all we ever spoke about. You see, there was a reason, Daniel (an avowed atheist) continued to want to see me (a Christian chaplain). Just as there were reasons he refused to reconcile with his family – though he obviously loved them and talked about them incessantly. He had been badly hurt, and he didn't trust them not to hurt him again. He said to me once, "You know, I do wish there was something I could hold on to ... something I could believe in."

Unfortunately, Daniel lived in a world where he didn't feel he could trust in God, because the only God he had ever heard of was a God of judgment and a God of vengeance. I don't pretend to know what all his issues were, but I do know this, Daniel's church, the people who were called to be the body of Christ, failed Daniel.

Somehow, they excluded him from the possibility of experiencing God's love for him, God's unconditional and never-ending love. They failed to offer him the bread of life.

Henri Nouwen, when asked how he was able to love so freely those around him, answered, "I don't ... it's the Jesus in me who recognizes and loves the Jesus in them."

All of us at Oakland Christian UCC too must recognize Jesus in one another. We are the anointed ones, the ones filled with the love of God through Christ ... empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are the ones of this world doing the work of God, we are the hands and feet of Christ.

We don't have to do this on our own ... in fact we couldn't *possibly* do this on our own. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us the strength and the courage and the power to do this. We are the instruments of God's peace and love. We are the instruments of God's mercy and justice. We are the instruments of God's grace.

Today's gospel says, "*The work of God is that you believe in the one that God sends.*" Of all those ordinary items in John's gospel that are turned to symbols of the eternal, Jesus is the main one. In his own mortal flesh and blood Jesus carries the presence of the eternal God. Jesus tells us that the Almighty God, Sovereign of the universe, our Creator, is personal, available, and present ... as close as the real flesh and blood of the person sitting next to us today. And Jesus tells us that this personal, available, present God calls something from us, makes demands on us. This God isn't a distant deity who sends earth spinning on its axis and then leaves it alone, leaves us alone to do as we please. No, this God is here, and is here to do something...here to do something in and through each of us.

My friends: the bread of life is not something unrecognizable. It is not something that we are to keep safely protected and tucked away. It is not something we need to hoard. It is meant to be shared with all. It is something for all of us and in all of us. It is of the heavens and it's in the earth. It is unearned and free for the taking...and it comes to us in abundance...for YOU...WE are the bread of life.

May we pray:

Jesus, you have a way of breaking through all our jargon and rules and even our most strongly held beliefs to be more than we ever expected or understood. Help us to draw near to you today and to know that you are near ... to obey your voice and to be your church. Reassure us with your presence, but where we need it, wake us up, shake us up, let us see the ways we fall short of your life. Accept the decisions of our hearts to follow you in new and better ways, in specific directions where you would call us. Draw us closer to one another that we might be one. We pray these words in your precious name. Amen.