

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 13  
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
August 1, 2021  
Exodus 16:2-4,9-15  
Psalm 78:23-29  
Ephesians 4:1-16  
John 6:24-35

## **Bread That Lasts and Nourishes**

During the years that I lived in Japan, I stored most of my worldly goods here in the US. After it became clear that I was going to stay in Japan for more than two years, I decided to move my stuff from the basement of my seminary pal Dina in Louisville, Kentucky to the barn of my brother Steve in Mountainair, New Mexico.

So, that summer of 1999 when I was home for a visit, my brother came to Georgia for a family gathering, and afterward, he and I drove to Louisville to load up my things. When we pulled up in front of Dina's house in Steve's pickup towing a U-Haul trailer, her car was in the driveway, and there wasn't room to park on the curb.

I got out, and Steve drove around the block to find a place to park. As I walked onto the lawn, Dina's daughter Riley, age 4, and toddler son Graham opened the door to the screened porch and saw me. Riley said, "Donna Mote, how did you come here?" It seemed to her that I had just appeared in her front yard after not seeing her for a year. My mode of transportation was unknown to her.

"I came here with my brother, Steve Mote, in his truck," I said. "Steve Mote?" she asked. "Yes, he's my big brother." By then we had met on the lawn and were exchanging hugs.

At the time Riley asked her question, "Donna Mote, how did you come here?" I knew it sounded familiar. What it reminded me of was the first question asked of Jesus in our gospel passage this morning: "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

The crowds that were following Jesus everywhere had observed that the boat he and his disciples had sailed in across the Lake of Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee, was taken by the disciples back across. They had observed that Jesus wasn't with them. (He was still up praying on the mountain.)

And yet, the next day, when the crowd had made their way back to the other side of the lake, there were the core group of male disciples, the twelve, and, lo and

behold, Jesus was there, too. He had walked on the water to where the disciples were straining at the oars against an adverse wind. And when he came alongside them, suddenly the boat reached its destination on the other side.

So, it's no wonder the people were perplexed and queried, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" It was mysterious. It seemed to them he had just appeared on the shore on the other side of the lake. His mode of transportation was unknown to them.

Jesus doesn't answer their question. He entirely foregoes an opportunity to say, "I walked across the lake on the water." He doesn't brag; he doesn't make the encounter about his supernatural capacities.

Instead, he not only sees them but sees through them. "Y'all aren't looking for me because of signs of God's power I have performed but because you got a free lunch yesterday and are looking for another one today."

"Don't work for the food that perishes, the food that will spoil, the bread that will grow stale and moldy. Work instead for the food that lasts, that gives life, and eternal life at that. This is the food that God's incarnate messenger offers, the one that God has chosen."

Next question from the crowd: "What must we do to perform the works of God?"

Answer: "The work of God is believing, trusting in the one God has sent."

Next question: "What sign are you going to give so that we can believe in you? What work will you do? Do something like Moses did when he gave our ancestors bread in the wilderness."

Answer: "Hold up a minute. Moses didn't feed our ancestors. God did that. And it is God who gives you the true bread from heaven, the bread of heaven. It gives life to the world."

Request: "Please, sir, give us this bread from now on."

And then Jesus launches into the great discourse on the bread of life, the bread that comes down from heaven.

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We continue today in our five-week sojourn in John's gospel in the midst of our year with Mark. Starting today and for the next three Sundays we're going to hear a great deal from Jesus in John about bread. It's all in the sixth chapter of John.

This past week on some clergy social media groups I follow, a number of sister priests were discussing what they refer to as "bread season in Year B."

Some said they quickly run out of anything to say on this discourse on bread, even though it is about the living bread which came down from heaven.

Others see it as an opportunity to talk about the realities of food insecurity and food scarcity in many parts of the world and in many communities and families in our own country.

Still others find that this time around in Year B, which we have every three years, after as much as a year and a half during the COVID-19 pandemic without receiving Eucharist, they are delighting in exploring the dimensions of the living bread this year.

I myself, as I discussed last week, am quite taken with this turn to John in the middle of our year with Mark as an opportunity to align ourselves with the Celtic season of autumn which begins this day, August 1, and lasts until October 30. As this season of fruition, of fullness, of mature crops provides much food for our tables and our bodies, so also in turn this mini-season with John's gospel gives us much food, spiritual food, for our souls and hearts and even our minds.

I know there are people for whom wheat gluten is extremely problematic, and in some cases, deadly. I know that celiac disease is a real and pressing concern for some. Further, I know that some people are very intentionally avoiding bread and other sources of carbohydrates and trying to eat more protein. Even so, across the centuries we have inherited language that uses bread as a category, as an expansively large and capacious metaphor to speak of foods of all kinds.

In our baptismal covenant we promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. When the gospel is rightly proclaimed, we continue in the apostles' teaching. When we follow the example of the apostles who were sent forth and go ourselves to bear witness to the love of God in the world, we follow the apostles' teaching and fellowship. When we gather at this table to break the bread of the Eucharist in the great Thanksgiving and gather at the rail or around the table together, we continue in the breaking of

bread. But the breaking of bread also continues when we dine together, share a conversation over a meal together, even have a coffee and a chat together. And when we gather for worship in person or are connected for worship online, we continue in the prayers. Each of these examples and many others we could no doubt name are, one way or another, fulfillments of these particular baptismal promises concerning these things.

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What is the bread of heaven? On what do you feast? For what do you deeply and truly hunger?

We can eat all kinds of things. Many things will fill us up at least for a little while. But what are the things that truly nourish us? To say the same thing another way, what is the nutrition that truly feeds and nourishes your soul and by extension your entire life?

Certainly, communion with the Holy One feeds and nourishes us, and we are nourished in receiving Holy Communion. In addition, you may find spiritual as well as physical nourishment in one or more literal foods, especially those cooked with love by you or for you and shared with others. Perhaps you are deeply nourished by some activity in which you so lose yourself that you become one with the thing you're doing, in the zone, fully absorbed, your work as your prayer and your prayer as your work in true Benedictine style.

We need nourishment, not merely something to eat. And yet, if I only feed myself—even if I am feeding myself the most nourishing of foods—if I only feed myself, I will become obese and sluggish and self-involved. On the other hand, if I only feed others—even if I feed them the most nourishing foods—if I only feed others and do not properly feed and care and nurture myself, I will starve to death.

The bread of life, the bread of heaven. What is the bread of heaven? On what do you feast? For what do you deeply and truly hunger?

God give us this bread always.