

Pentecost 12B (8/12/2018)

1 Kings 19:4-8

Psalm 34:1-8

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 41-51

The bread of life not only feeds our hunger, but also fills us with purpose. Being fed with Christ strengthens us for a life of faith and love – for truth-telling, for speech that gives grace, for kindness and forgiveness. The Lord is good, and fills us with goodness to overflowing.

Carbo-loading. Anyone who is familiar with competitive sports knows the longstanding tradition of carbo-loading, that is, consuming generous helpings of carbohydrates like pasta, bread, potatoes, or sweets in the days leading up to a big game. Carbohydrates provide a store of glycogen in the muscles and liver, maximizing an athlete's energy level during competition. But, the nutritional specifics of carbo-loading are lost on many of us, so athletes often do it wrong. *The Office*, a well-loved comedy series, satirizes this kind of mistake in the first episode of season four. The office's bumbling manager, Michael Scott, organizes an ill-fated office-wide fundraiser, "Michael Scott's Dunder Mifflin Scranton Meredith Palmer Celebrity Rabies Awareness Pro-Am Fun Run Race for the Cure." Immediately prior to the start of the race, he eats a dinner-size portion of fettuccine alfredo. "Time to carbo-load!" he announces. And of course, he spends the entire five-kilometer race in pain, and barely finishes.

Clearly, that's not the way to do it. But, the practice of carbo-loading emphasizes the connection between nutrition and performance, between

eating and striving. Can we explore a similar connection between our spiritual food and our lives of faith? “I am the bread of life,” Jesus proclaims in our Gospel from John, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever trusts in me will never be thirsty.” **What does it mean to be fed not with ordinary bread, but the bread of life? If we are sustained by Christ’s own life, given and poured out for us, then what are we sustained *for*?**

“You were taught... to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,” the Apostle Paul insists in the verses leading up to our second reading from Ephesians today,¹ “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ....”² If the gift of faith³ is daily bread to eat, then it fills us for a reason, that we might be renewed, that we might grow up into faithfulness and love. In other words, **the bread of life is refreshment; it feeds our spiritual hunger, yes, *and* it strengthens us for the challenges of discipleship.**

So, what does it actually look like to be refreshed in faith, to “grow up” into Christ? **If the bread of life is our nutrition, then how should it impact our performance?** Paul makes a list:

Let us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ...Be angry but do not sin.... Thieves must... labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up ...so that your words may give grace to those who hear. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another ...forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

¹ 4:23.

² 4:15.

³ 2:8-9.

I don't think Paul's emphasis on speech is accidental. He understands the power of words to either build up or tear down. As evidenced by internet trolling and cyberbullying, for instance, malicious language can quickly dissolve relationships and undermine community. So, **Paul insists on intentionally thoughtful, edifying speech – patterns of communication that not only avoid malice and slander, but “give grace.” To quote the New English Bible translation of verse twenty-nine in our reading from Ephesians, our words should “bring a blessing,” not a curse.**⁴

This discipline is a profound challenge to even the most patient disciples among us. Anger so quickly turns to bitterness, and our first instinct is to lash out. Nevertheless, **our spiritual food is a source of moral strength.** A year ago this weekend, clergy and other community members met for a prayer service at a church in Charlottesville, Virginia in preparation to face white supremacists who were gathering for a rally there. Although violence broke out repeatedly over the course of the rally, one instance of peaceful resistance spoke to the power of righteous language to bear witness to Christ and transform hostile circumstances. The following story comes from an interview broadcast on NPR last week:

"We had originally said we were going to stand silently," says Rev. [Osagyefo] Sekou, a recording artist, author, theologian and activist who helped train volunteers at the counter-protest. "But the Nazis were marching past us in these various battalions, cursing and yelling —

⁴ See Ralph P. Martin, *Interpretation: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, 61.

mostly homophobic slurs — at us. And you could feel the energy of the people who weren't with us, who we had not trained. [They] were getting amped up."

Sekou says he knew, in that moment, he had to change the atmosphere. "I know song can do that. So I just broke into 'This Little Light of Mine.'"

In a moment captured on video, the clergy and volunteers who sang — a group that included famed academic and activist Cornel West — are shown standing in a line, their voices rising over the chants of "You will not replace us" from the rally crowd. "The tensions went down ... and it shook the Nazis," Sekou says. "They didn't know what to do with all that joy. We weren't going to let the darkness have the last word."⁵

"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up... so that your words may give grace to those who hear." **The courage and vitality of that particular communion of saints was not happenstance. They drew their strength from time together in prayer and preparation, leaning on the one who had claimed them and called them to the life of discipleship in the first place. He was their bread, their spiritual food, and the source of their moral fortitude.**

Dear church, the bread of life not only feeds our hunger, but also fills us with purpose. Being fed with Christ strengthens us for a life of faith and love – for truth-telling, for speech that gives grace, for kindness and forgiveness. It's spiritual food for an abundant life. So come, taste and see that the Lord is good, and let his goodness fill you to overflowing.

⁵ Eric Deggans, "'This Little Light of Mine' Shines On, A Timeless Tool of Resistance," <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/06/630051651/american-anthem-this-little-light-of-mine-resistance>.