

“Finally, Bread”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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We have had a lot of build up leading to this day. Beginning with July 25th, when we heard the story of Jesus feeding the thousands through the miracle of multiplying the loaves and fishes, each Sunday since then has hovered in the 6th chapter of John, and has Jesus repeating the phrase over and over again, “I am the bread of life.”

This Sunday, those words are more than a tease. We will finally take the bread today, celebrating in the sacrament Jesus commanded us to follow. Words will become flour, salt, and yeast, and a tiny cube of bread in our mouths will help convey the truth of the incarnational presence of Jesus Christ-- that is, that Jesus does not only dwell in heaven, hanging out with God; Jesus isn't trapped in time, bound to a history that no longer exists for us today, nor is he to stay only in words, closed into pages of a bible unless we bother to open it; Jesus-- the word made flesh, the bread of life-- is as near to us as the sacrament we will soon ingest.

You would think that after all this build-up, Jesus' followers, on the last day of this series of sayings about Jesus being the bread of life, would be celebratory. They would finally *get it*. They would now be able to chart their course of discipleship with the confidence of spiritual masters.

But, no. Instead, we see a bunch of bumbling, confused disciples.

If you have ever felt confused in the pathways of faith; if you have ever wondered if you're simply doing it *wrong*; if you have ever looked around, and thought: “wow, everyone else looks like they have found their Jesus jam, what's wrong with me?” well, it turns out, you are not alone. As it turns out, John's gospel says, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” Jesus was left with his 12 disciples, and he asked them, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter speaks for the 12, asking, “To whom can we go? You have the words to eternal life.”

As it seems, Jesus' followers went from an audience of thousands, to a crowd that followed him around, to then only his 12, dedicated disciples... until, when he heads to the cross, he goes on his own; Judas will betray him, and even Peter will deny him.

But here's the genius of John's gospel writing: we as readers and listeners get to observe the crowds that turn away, who either feel threatened, or just aren't that curious. And then, we get to choose. Will we be like them? Or, will we stick around for a while, and see what this deeper, seemingly hidden vision of reality Jesus might offer us?

As for the disciples, Peter's question, "To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" is an affirmation of trust in Jesus-- to follow him, even though they are not certain where exactly that will lead.

We too are invited to trust in what Jesus offers, and even allow Jesus to make a dwelling in us.

"How lovely is your dwelling place!" the Psalmist chants. King Solomon had longed dreamed of building a dwelling place for God-- an idea his father David once spoke of, but never accomplished. When the day finally came that the Jerusalem Temple had been finished, great ceremony occurred as the priests processed with the Ark of the Covenant, and placed it beneath the cherubim; a cloud filled the Temple and it was the glory of the Lord; even the priests were overwhelmed by it. No longer would the Hebrews need to worship in the sites where the Canaanites worshipped their gods and goddesses. The Temple would be a central place where only the God of Israel would be worshiped. Not only that; during Solomon's prayer of dedication at the Temple, we hear it will be a location for reconciliation between neighbors; a place for prayer when they have been defeated in battle; a place where the nation can find redemption when it has screwed up; a place to pray when plague, drought, or other natural disasters have fallen upon the people; a place where foreigners who have heard of God's name can pray, and God will respond to their need.

Even today, when we face a divided nation that rips apart even our own neighborhoods and families, when COVID continues to plague us relentlessly, when our coasts nearby are battered by a hurricane, and Haiti further off has lost over a thousand in an earthquake followed by a tropical storm. We watch with dismay as the people of Afghanistan have been abandoned into the Taliban's grip; many of us know soldiers who helped keep the Taliban at bay so that children could be educated, women and girls could enjoy basic human rights, and people could work and enjoy family life in relative peace. Soon, Afghan refugees will be looking for a place to call home-- at least for now-- here in northern NJ, and we have been approached by Refugee Assistance Partners to see how our congregation might help to resettle Afghans trying to rebuild their lives after so much has been lost.

Our church, as a space where we meet God and then find out how that causes us to act in the world, has a location of meaning. This is important; some of the things we do here, there are very few public spaces where we can participate in this work together.

But, as Solomon noted, the Temple is not the *only* place where we can meet God, and neither is the church. Solomon asked, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" He knew that there was important prayer and important work to be done in the Temple as God's house. But he also knew that God was already doing important work far, far beyond that house.

As Jesus tells it, God is doing that work in us and through us. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me"

Yesterday, I found out that Carmanita Pimms died. Carman was a member of the Yakama Nation, and she directed the Campbell Farm, a ministry of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Wapota, Washington. I've gone on mission trips there twice; once with my church in Chicago, and once with this church. Carmanita and I stayed in touch; I considered her a wise woman, and sometimes I would ask her opinion while writing my sermons. Carman was both Black and Native American. She was a Presbyterian lay minister, and visited the long house where she enacted sacred rituals of the Yakama elders. She began as a low-wage cook at the farm, helping to feed the kids from the reservation who would show up. Like Moses before her, God saw purpose and calling in her, and led her to become the director of the center, where she mentored thousands of indigenous children, youth, and their families living in the intersections of extreme poverty, as well as addiction and abuse. We learned these problems had their roots in histories of occupation, displacement, and family separation based in the belief that the expansion of the United States was divinely ordained, justifiable, and inevitable.

But Carman, who had endured many tragedies and traumas herself, embodied a stubborn commitment to the uplifting of her people. Her last post, only a few days ago, was looking for bottled waters from the community to hand out with lunches to homeless neighbors.

One thing that stood out about Carman was that she knew about how sacred food can be. She was bread to her community. Even when she was the executive director and running the farm and its programs herself, you could still find her in the kitchen, making fry bread tacos or baking pies or cakes to raise money for the farm. When I brought a group of teenagers there to volunteer, she gave them a speech about what to do with the food they were served. "This is the only food some of these kids on the reservation will eat all day. So do not let them hear you say, 'I don't eat that,' and certainly don't let them hear your opinion if you dislike the food on your plate. The children here are so poor, they cannot have the option of not liking the only food they are given." Our group of mostly suburban, middle class kids, who had been spoon-fed on choice, squirmed at this, but they took Carmanita's message to heart, whether at lunch with the kids on the reservation, or serving food at a nearby shelter for survivors of relationship violence, or in our closing communion ceremony, where Carman also smudged us each with a branch of burning sage. There was also that time when she came to the quarters where our kids were staying, holding a glass pitcher of brown and red slush. With tears in her eyes, she told our kids that they were flushing the wrong things down the toilet, and they had ruined the septic system the farm relies upon. Our kids were close to crying too, when, all of the sudden, Carman put the pitcher to her lips and took a huge sip from it. She had pranked even the punkiest kids of our group.

"Whoever eats this bread will live forever." As we receive the bread, and the juice today, we are reminded of how much God dwells in us, and how we dwell in God-- and this relationship continues even beyond the boundaries of our church, even beyond the boundaries of this life as we know it. Finally, bread. Take it, become it, live it, share it. Amen.