

“Bread of Life: The Christian Journey as the Body of Christ”
A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 13, Year B
August 1, 2021
Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park
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Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Later on in the service, we’ll line up to receive communion. When I give you a piece of bread that we have prayed over, I will say, “The body of Christ, the bread of heaven.” Afterward, when we give thanks in the post-communion prayer we are borrowing this summer from the Church of England’s Common Worship resource, we will say,

God of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ’s body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name; through Christ our Lord.

May we who share Christ’s body live his risen life. Or as one of the Book of Common Prayer postcommunion prayers says,

*Almighty and everliving God,
we thank you for feeding us with the spiritual food
of the most precious Body and Blood
of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ;
and for assuring us in these holy mysteries
that we are living members of the Body of your Son,
and heirs of your eternal kingdom.*

For assuring in these holy mysteries that we are living members of the Body of your Son.

So just what does all this talk about the Bread of Heaven and the Body of Christ mean?

The body of Christ is a term that has a number of meanings. 1) It’s the living body of Christ who incarnated divinity, whose broken body was taken down from the cross and who later experienced resurrection. 2) It’s the bread that we receive at the Eucharist. 3) It is the church, the body of people, the group of people, called Christians. So, when we say that we have become living members of the Body of God’s son, it means that as we receive the sacrament together, we are united with one another as the church, in this place, across the Episcopal Church, across all churches, and across time with all those who feast on the bread and wine at God’s banquet table. And in doing so, we not only

become part of the body of people called Christians...that's one meaning of the Body of Christ. But we also become part of Christ himself, whose body was broken for us and raised to new life for us?

How can we do this? How can we become Christ's body in the world? The letter to the Ephesians, appointed as today's epistle reading, has something to say about this:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:4-16)

I find this lesson beautiful and intriguing. You might recall the words, "There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" from the opening dialogue in our baptismal rite. We could say that this lesson teaches us what baptism, and thus the Christian life, is about: being "joined and knit together" to promote "the body's growth in building itself up in love." We build up the Body of Christ, the Church, through exercising our gifts--"equipping the saints [all of us] for the work of ministry" as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and so many other ways--and by "speaking the truth in love." All these gifts have been given to us so that we can join with Christ in making "captivity itself a captive." We are called to go out into the world and "proclaim release to the captives" (Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 61:1). As I said in my sermon last week on Jesus' lesser known miracle of renunciation (that is, in rejecting the kingship the people would have forced on him), the kingdom Christ intends for us is a caring community in which our freedom is joined to the liberation of all God's children. We are not intended for kingdom as the world understands it at all, but rather for "kin-dom," for a reordered society in which there are no margins, only family gathered around a table. That is the one hope of our calling. As the prayer says, "Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free."

We become the bread of life to the world that we receive here when we go out to feed those who hunger in body and spirit, and by doing so, we help set them free. And set ourselves free. Jesus fed people's bodies by the thousands. To feed the body, we can give to our Food Pantry, cook and serve lunch at our Saturday Soup community meal, and support policies that ensure no one is hungry and everyone has access to nutritious food. To feed the spirit, we can offer kindness to people, we can support access to education

and mental health care, we can share the good news of our faith, and we can love one another. As we do this work, it not only feeds the body and soul, but it liberates those held captive to inequality and those who benefit from such systems.

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

In the feast set at God's table, we eat the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. We consume Christ. And then, joined together as one church in this time and place, and in every time and place, we become Christ to the world. We become the bread that nourishes body and spirit. We become the body that makes captivity itself a captive, striving for liberation for all. We become the image of God to one another.

We are the bread of life.

Amen.