

August 9, 2009 10th Sunday after Pentecost *Bread that's Blessed*
John 6:24-35

Children—altar display of 12 baskets representing the leftovers from the meal Jesus fed the 5000 from the boy's gift of 5 loaves and 2 fish. Even as Jesus provided enough bread and fish to feed all of them so also Jesus is the "Bread of Life" for us.

It's a ritual known in many Christian families, especially at holiday time. I know it's a ritual our family always shares when we gather with Cheryl's sisters and clan on occasion. The ritual is the usual question just before we eat when somebody says, "OK, whose gonna bless it?" The food has got to be blessed, particularly on occasions when everybody is together. Or even when they can't quite be all together. For example, I remember our Thanksgiving meal at Cheryl's sister's home in Buchanan, Virginia, when our son, Chris, who is now serving in Afghanistan, was at Army Specialist Training in Alabama 4 years ago. We happened to all be talking to him on the speakerphone when it was time to eat. So, as everyone joined hands with mouths watering, somebody asked the inevitable question, "OK, whose gonna bless it?" I said to Chris on the phone, "OK, Chris, it's your turn." Immediately we heard by telephone "God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food. By God's hands we all are fed. Give us, Lord, our daily bread. Amen!" (It reminded me of the time when Cheryl and I were traveling and left Chris, then four years old, in their care. We called them from Israel where we were traveling and my Mother told me about a supper she served a day or two before. It seems she called Chris to dinner and he ran from his bedroom at the other end of the house to the table while reciting "God is great, God is good....!") and finished it by the time he got to dinner!) You see, the food has got to be blessed. We all felt it was uniquely blessed that day!

They were hungry, the people that were looking for Jesus that day. They were hungry. That's why they were so desperately trying to find him. There was little wonder they thought Jesus could feed

them. Just the day before he had fed them, all five thousand of them, with a young boy's five barley loaves and two fish. But when they do find him and ask for more bread Jesus seems a bit perturbed with them. It's as if he is saying, "I know why you're looking for me; you want some more of that free and easy food!" Jesus knew that they really did not know what they were hungry for. They came to Jesus looking for that which perishes, quick and easy nourishment for their bodies. Jesus knew what they were really hungry for: food that endures for eternal life; food that only Jesus could give them—food that only he can bless.

It can be said that the world in which we live provides us all the bread and fish we ever need. In many ways the culture in which we live provides us far more food that we ever need for our basic needs. Today most of us really don't want for anything. We have enough to eat and then some! We certainly don't go hungry! But, strangely enough, don't we nevertheless inevitably find ourselves trying to find Jesus, just as they did back then? Don't we always, after we've had our fill of everything our world can give us, find ourselves still desperately looking for Jesus?

You and I are hungry. And often we are as confused as that crowd when it comes to knowing what we really want, what we really need. We run to Jesus in our hunger because we need the bread that only he can bless.

As scientific study has revealed (*Roanoke Times*, February 10, 2006) that your body has an innate sense of what it needs for balanced nutrition. Your entire system works together to help you find and identify exactly what your body is craving. According to this research the human sense of smell has learned to recognize certain nutritional signals in the odor, scent, and flavor of many vegetables, fruits, and spices. Researchers Stephen Goff and Harry Klee reported in the journal *Science* that "studies of flavor preferences and aversions suggest that flavor perception may be

linked to nutritional or health value.” Who knows? Maybe that’s one of the reasons that garlic and onion sizzling in the pan seems so pleasing and inviting to us on occasion. It might be a quite natural nutritional signal for us to take in what we need. It really is true that our bodies know what we need—that there are times when certain foods become designated, or “blessed,” for us!

But it has to be the right kind of food. Not every kind of food is “blessed” for us.

As most of you know, I am the cook in the house. For the first five years or so of our marital bliss when Cheryl and I shared equally in the meal preparation and cleanup, a daily cry was heard from the kitchen. It was a daily announcement that we learned from our house mates with whom we shared a small 3 bedroom house on Parthenia Drive in Durham while at Duke Divinity School. The four of us shared equally the household chores there, one of which, of course, was washing the dishes. You can imagine how high the pile came to be at the end of each day after four of us shared three meals. Whenever the one whose turn it was to wash those dishes came in after a long day and, failing to look at the chores calendar and asked, “Whose pile of dishes are these?” A great chorus came in response to that question from every corner of the house: “It’s not my turn!” For the first five years of our marriage we continued that chore-sharing practice and every time I washed, dried, and put away the last dish on my day, I never failed to cry out in relief, “It’s not my turn!” You see, I simply do not enjoy washing dishes. My displeasure of that particular chore grew so intense that one day I simply blurted out, “Look, Cheryl, I’ll do ALL the cooking if you’ll wash all the dishes.” To my surprise, she immediately took me up on that. And that has been our practice now for almost 30 years.

I told you that story in order to tell you this one: You know what happens to me when I come home late one evening and have not

prepared adequately to have the crock pot ready, having cooked all day that nutritional meal for which my body craves and is so very healthy for me? Well, as I rush to prepare something, anything, for us to eat that night, I am so hungry I eat whatever I can get my hands on. Does that ever happen to you? We just blindly react to that hunger in us, doing anything, eating anything, to satisfy that need. Needless to say most of what I eat on those occasions is not particularly “blessed” for me—it is not what my body truly craves. It is not what my natural, healthy hunger truly long for. Most of what I end up consuming is not even very good for me. Now I usually manage to finally prepare something that is much better for me than what I grab at on the spur of the moment, but then I don’t seem to have quite as much room for it—I guess you’re never too old to heed your mother’s warning about spoiling your supper. On occasions like that I simply do not have the patience nor the wisdom to wait for the food that is truly “blessed” for me, that for which I really long, what I really need.

As it is with your body, so it is with your soul. There is a deep hunger in us that only Jesus can satisfy. The problem is we are so temped today to fill that void in our hearts in so many ways that just aren’t good for us. We buy things, lots of things, and then have to provide for ways to store all our things while the rest of them fall away obsolete or worn out or out of style. Most of us have more basketsful of leftover things than Jesus produced for the 5,000 that day! But all that leaves us so unsatisfied, doesn’t it?

You need bread blessed by Jesus. You need to find him, be with him, and let him feed you regularly if you are to acquire all the spiritual nutrition and strength you need for day to day living. You need to sit down with Jesus at his table and let him share with you the bread blessed by his own hand. You need to share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion where we find him, eat with him, and get what we really need. You need to gather around the font of Holy Baptism and, as the sacred water anoints yet another child

of God just like you, announcing to all that God loves us long before we are even born, receive again the blessing that only Jesus can give us. Whenever the church blesses the water of Baptism it is a sign to all of the blessing of God upon the all the children of God. Whenever the church blesses the bread through the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving at our Lord's Table in his name, all who share in it are blessed; all who partake of it get exactly what they need. When the church is dismissed at the close of worship it is with the blessing of God that we go back out into the world, having received from Jesus in Sacrament, Word, music, prayer, and fellowship the very bread of life.

In other church traditions the clergy make the sign of the cross as a distinctive act of consecration over bread, wine, and water, and as an act of blessing of the people in benediction. The Dean of Duke Divinity School Dr. Greg Jones made reference to this act in a sermon he shared a number of years ago as he spoke at a prayer breakfast I attended in Hampton. He said their young son, Ben, watched the priest very carefully as they shared in worship in an Episcopal Church as a family one Sunday, taking in all the drama and action of that very traditional liturgy for the first time. He asked his Dad about it and Greg explained to him what the sign of the cross meant in that tradition and reminded him that we also use that sign in our own church whenever we renew our baptismal vows together, the minister making the sign of the cross on the forehead with the water of baptism saying, "Remember your baptism and be thankful." A day or two later Greg's wife, Susan, was having a particularly difficult day. Their young son noticed that Mom was upset and wanted to help her. So Ben crawled up in her lap, kissed her on the forehead four times up and down and three times across and said, "Mother, you are blessed." And she was!

They came to Jesus because they were hungry. Jesus knew that they really did not know what they were hungry for. They came to

Jesus looking for that which perishes, quick and easy nourishment for their bodies. Jesus knew what they were really hungry for: food that endures for eternal life; food that only Jesus could give them—food that only he can bless.

You see, Jesus shows you this (basketsful of leftovers) to really point to this (the altar, the Lord's table on which they are displayed, the font of Baptism, the Holy Scripture, the Word proclaimed, the blessing given).

You have come looking for Jesus today because you are hungry. What Jesus gives you is not perishable bread but the very bread of life. He said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." That bread is right here today in Sacrament, Word, prayer, music, and fellowship. You have come desperately looking for Jesus and you have found him.

You who are hungry, you who long for what you really need, you who are yourselves already blessed by Jesus in your baptism, meet Jesus here today and find what you really need. He is the bread of life. If you try to satisfy that hunger in you with anything and everything in the culture you can get your hands on, you won't just spoil your supper, you just may spoil your life.

William G. Davidson