

“Of Heaven and Earth”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 12, 2018

11th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 34:1-8

John 6:35, 41-51

From the very beginning of John’s gospel, Jesus has been described as the incarnated one, the Word that became flesh and, as Eugene Peterson’s translation says, “moved into the neighborhood.” (John 1:14, *The Message*) Though he was born a child, his origins rest in heaven.

Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus describes himself with a series of images – trying to paint a picture for those he encountered, and for those who would later encounter him through scripture – to explain something they had never seen before: the divine entering their midst; heaven come to earth. Therefore, Jesus will say periodically in John, *I am...the bread, the vine, the living water, the good shepherd, the way, the truth, the life.*

After multiplying the loaves and fishes to feed the five thousand in the beginning of this chapter, Jesus knows that the people are hungering for more. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus says. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (v. 35)

It is hardly a surprise that the Jewish people in his audience, who had miraculously been fed, pick up on Jesus’ references to God’s daily gift of manna from heaven in the Exodus story. This reworking of the story of God’s provision in the wilderness is not only to illustrate that –like God – Jesus provides, but also to affirm that – like God – Jesus’ provision originates from the same place. Just as the origin of the food and water for the Israelites was from heaven – from God – Jesus himself as bread of heaven comes from God; and therefore is God’s very presence among them.

But when Jesus says, “I am the bread that came down from heaven,” (v. 41) immediately, his Jewish audience objects, murmuring among themselves. These people know their scripture: *The bread of heaven is what fed our ancestors back in the time of Moses*, they correctly point out. They also know Jesus’ background: they know his parents, that he was raised in Nazareth. And these Judeans know the commandments: “the Lord God said, ‘I am the Lord your God; you shall have no

other gods.” They knew these things; they had head knowledge of God; but perhaps they did not know God by heart, and therefore did not trust.¹

Those that were fed that day came looking for more, but Jesus faces them with the reality of his identity; and with the opportunity for a different kind of life, if they choose to participate in it. It turns out that the “word made flesh” is more than just a miracle worker; and that Jesus, while the *son of Joseph*, is our Brother that shows us the Father, the one that connects us to and makes us participants in the divine life.

Where you come from matters. Your origins are what you can draw from to help make sense of your present. Having grown up in Kentucky, it is no surprise that I am naturally drawn to basketball, bluegrass fields, and the smell of a cigar. Often, our origins are idealized, almost immortalized – we wonder what it would be like if we could only go back. At the same time, where we come from may be where we never want to return – we will not or cannot go back to the way it once was. As a result, where we come from may be that which we spend our time and effort trying to correct, reinterpret, or make up for.² If we want to leave our past, we’re not able, but when we try to return there, it’s not possible.

Jesus as the bread of life makes a claim not only on our present and our future, but also on our past. Although our origins, our past, cannot be erased or forgotten, it can be recreated through our trust in Jesus, the bread of heaven. This is become through Christ – the one who came from heaven to earth and moved into the neighborhood – we are adopted to join Christ as fellow children of God. Thus, our origins – created in God’s own image – are not forgotten: no matter what we might do or fail to do, we cannot forget our past; nor can we, by ourselves, fix it. But, as God’s people, we are given a new identity and a new challenge – to be family for one another, like brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, people who gather together at the table and go forth to share the good gifts received with others.

In our gathering together for worship, fellowship and outreach, in our eating and drinking together, and in our sharing of our gifts, we have an opportunity to ensure that the resources we offer, the tables that we spread, and the doors that we open become a part of God’s activity in the world. When we share the bread of

¹ Craig Satterlee from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Karoline Lewis, “Past Matters”

heaven together, we are claiming that God's will is for all of us, and that all of the world will one day be restored, saved, healed and made whole.

The same God who sent his Son to dwell among us calls us care for one another: for if God could leave the glory of heaven in order to reach us, then we too can leave the comforts of life, we too can depart from our comfortable homes and places of worship, and walk out of the doors ready to align ourselves with a life that is eternal. We do this by sharing with the poor, and feeding the hungry, and befriending the lonely, and healing the people and systems that are sick.

And so, we could gather week after week like those on mountainside who came to Jesus looking for another sign; we could gather for worship hoping for a spiritual "fix" or "re-charge" while ignoring the life-transforming power of Jesus's presence as the bread of heaven. We could gather on Sundays and then go on with life the rest of the week, believing that our response to receiving the bread of life can wait for another time, or is just for me, or just some of us, and not for others in our community and beyond.³

Of course, like the in the story about manna, Jesus is not only talking here about the relief of literal hunger. The Exodus story is about trust: God delivered Israel out of slavery in Egypt, leading them through the waters of the Red Sea. But once in the desert, Israel did not trust God to provide for them; so much so that they pleaded with Moses to go back. Even so, God provided for their daily needs. In the same way, when ask God to "give us this day our daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer, we are requesting help in trusting God for provision; that there will be enough for us and for others, and that we'll be included and participate in the gift of sharing.

I am repeatedly amazed by the response of care and compassion within this family of faith – that when a need arises, or is brought to our attention, the response is one of selflessness and generosity. This has taken place here again over the past few weeks as we have conducted not one, but two, "back-to-school" collections – one for the backpack giveaways at the Chagrin Falls Park Community Center, as well as for our newer partner school, F.D.R. Academy in Cleveland. This past week, I was able to deliver over fifty backpacks and other school supplies to Chagrin Falls Park, putting them over their goal of 200 backpacks to give away at this Tuesday's event. I also drove a huge load of supplies to F.D.R. – collected through the Pass-It-On store and from Kenston students and Amazon orders –

³ Juan Carlos Huertas, "Sharing in the Life of Jesus"

handing them off to Robbie Paynther to distribute among the other teachers and classrooms at her school.

These are only a couple of examples of the kind of generosity that is displayed at Valley. I sometimes wonder, then, why we are not always so generous to ourselves; why it can be hard to place our trust in God's provision in our own lives; why we can become so consumed by fear and anxiety. Sometimes, I think, we have trouble imagining that God cares much about what seems to us like the ordinary and mundane. And yet, God uses common, ordinary things – like bread and fish – as well as ordinary people – like us – to achieve amazing things; the kind of things that give testimony to and bring to the world God's salvation.

And so, may this congregation – in our gatherings, our conversations, our shared meals, and our collective giving – be an active agent in creating the realization of heaven coming to the common and the ordinary. May we together become a people that extend life on earth to the eternal; a people who live out the meaning of sharing Jesus as the bread of life to a hungry world. AMEN.