

## WHAT IS THIS? WHO IS THIS?

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – B August 5, 2018

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15  
Ephesians 4:1-16, John 6:24-35

“It is my Father who gives you true bread from heaven.” With those words, Jesus told the crowds that they needed to look for something deeper than their next meal. The “feeding of the crowd” sign that is told in all four gospels, is about much more than a miracle of pulling a meal out of thin air. There was no sleight of hand, no hidden supply of food from which to draw; yet Jesus takes what is already there, blesses it, distributes it, and a crowd is satisfied—at least until they get hungry again.

The people were craving more food, no doubt, but they also wanted a miracle (a sign), proof that Jesus was “of God,” but I suspect too, they wanted the assurance that he could deliver for them whatever they needed. They recalled the story that had been handed down to them: when Moses fed the crowd of hungry, weary, complaining Israelites in the wilderness.

But Jesus offers a stern corrective. First, it wasn’t Moses who delivered for them. Yes, he was a great leader, but he was human. Moses (and Aaron) acted on the word of God that promised God would not let his people starve in the wilderness. It was God’s doing that brought forth the feeding in the wilderness long ago. In the evening, flocks of quail covered the ground; and in the morning, when the dew lifted, the ground was covered with a fine flaky substance that owes its name to their wonder at what it could be. “Man-uh?” they asked: “What is it?”

If that sounds like a strange name, consider that it came down from the God who revealed his own name to be “I am.” (But Moses said to God: “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”—Exodus 3:13-14)

Centuries later, Jesus will remind people that *manna* was indeed bread from heaven; and, in him, the people will come to know the bread of heaven that endures, because this bread, Jesus came to satisfy the deeper hunger: the ache that gnaws at each of us when we ask the question: “How will I know if God truly loves me? What must I do to be saved?”

The people were looking for a formula for salvation, perhaps even a way to re-create the sign they had seen: “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus tells them that it is as simple as this: “Believe in the One whom God has sent.” But the human tendency isn’t to simply believe, but rather ask more questions, and demand proof.

“What sign will you show us?” they asked. “How can we be sure? You know, Moses gave the people manna in the wilderness.” Jesus told them: “Well, no. The Father did that; and God will give you all the true bread from heaven that satisfies that deepest yearning you have within you.” And this time, when he said “my Father,” they believed. “Sir, give us this bread always.” To that, Jesus responded: “It’s yours! I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Jesus promises us God’s love and our belonging, but he goes beyond that to assure us that he will always be with us. In a mystery that is beyond our ability to comprehend, the Risen Christ is present among us. We gather as church to celebrate Jesus’ presence. We affirm our faith: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son,

who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.” [Nicene Creed]

We circle The Table in confidence and hope. Borrowing the words of our Episcopal sisters and brothers, we receive “the Body of Christ: the Bread of Heaven.”

And through the mystery of God’s love in Jesus, lives are transformed. Even one of the most notorious persecutors of the first-century Christians—the earliest followers of the Risen Jesus—came to believe and proclaim: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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.” [Ephesians 4:1-6]

No action of our own makes this possible. It is the God who sent manna from heaven to feed his chosen people in the wilderness, the God who wiped the scales from the eyes of the misguided zealot who would not see, and the God who provides bread of life, the true bread from heaven: He will show us love without limits. He will equip us to reflect that love as we do “greater things than these.” People will be amazed and ask: “What is this?” and “Who is this?” And we will help them come to know the bread that satisfies: the *living bread* from heaven. Amen.