

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Good morning. Well, in case you were here last week, or in some other church that uses the Revised Common Lectionary, you might be thinking that I have just read the wrong Gospel reading. Isn't that what we heard last week - I am the Bread of Life? Well, yes, yes it is! And just so you'll know, there are two more Sundays of the same thing, with only slight variations.

Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John is all about being fed. It begins with the feeding of the 5000 and is followed by Jesus walking on water and calming the storm. The rest of the chapter has Jesus saying three times, "I am the Bread of Life" and ends up with Jesus repeating more of his words about the same topic.

Why did John repeat himself so many times? The most obvious guess would be that he wanted to be sure that he got his point across. One writer suggests that John's point is not denying the miracle aspect of the feeding of the 5000, but that there is something that goes beyond the miracle. The rest of the chapter expands the bread image beyond the feeding story, "so that the real meaning of the event is that it was a symbol that Jesus offers the true bread, is the true bread and will be broken and shared in the bread and wine of the eucharist." (William Loader)

John over and over again takes stories from the Jesus tradition and re-works them so that they make statements about who Jesus is for us. Using images from our daily needs, John declares that our deepest desires are met in Jesus, because he is intimately linked to God as God's Son. So, as the healing of the blind man story in chapter 9 points to Jesus as the 'light of the world', and the story of the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11 points to Jesus as the 'resurrection and the life', the feeding of the 5000 points to Jesus as the 'bread of life.'

Bread as a daily need is, of course, not unique to the Jesus story. No one survives without food, no matter who we are. The Hebrew scripture for today tells us about Elijah, who is running away to escape the murderous wrath of Ahab and Jezebel (read chapter 18 of the first book of Kings if you want the whole amazing story). When he has journeyed a whole day into the wilderness, he sits down under a tree

and asks God to let him die. He is worn out. He has had it with running and he is done.

So he lies down and falls asleep - the kind of tired sleep that comes from emotional as well as physical exhaustion. But he is awakened by an angel - a messenger from God - who tells him to get up and eat. After he has eaten he goes back to sleep, but the angel comes again and tells him to get up and eat so that he can survive the journey. Elijah eats again and is sustained for 40 days and nights until he comes to Horeb, the mount of God.

Have you ever felt like Elijah - too tired to endure what is coming - too tired to go on? That you wanted to crawl in a hole and die? It happens to many of us. Maybe more of us than we know. And when we are overwhelmed by the changes in our lives that bring us down - when we don't know whether we are coming or going - when we are undone - we lose our fragile connections to God.

When we are undone, and lose our connections to God, all that remains is people. When we are undone, and can no longer be ourselves, the only way we can restore those connections to God is through the hands of others. The only real bread of life is people, people who are prepared in a small way — or in a much bigger way — to be consumed by our need for care. People who exhaust themselves sorting out the finances we can no longer manage. Chaplains and nurses who learn to care for themselves so they can give themselves to others. Folks who let their horizons be limited by years of caring.

At St. James in Florence, Italy, there is a young man who has been fairly recently confirmed into the Episcopal Church. He rides the bus to church on Sundays, often the only person in the chapel for early service. Even more recently, however, he has been ill, almost to the point of death. He has been in and out of doctors' offices, clinics and hospitals, all in an attempt to find out what is wrong. He has lost so much weight that he is painfully thin - very fragile.

After months of uncertainty, Francesco was diagnosed with celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder in which ingesting gluten causes inflammation of the small intestine and prevents the absorption of nutrients. Gluten, as I'm sure you know, is found in wheat, barley, rye. If you aren't supposed to eat gluten, you can't eat pasta, breads, baked goods and pastries - all staples of an Italian diet.

And communion wafers.

Francesco had been undone.

When I celebrated the Eucharist for the first time at St James, Francesco was there. I had been told about him, and we chatted a little bit before I began the service. He and I were the only ones present. When I held up the bread and wine and said, "The gifts of God for the people of God," I knew he could not receive the bread, but I offered him the wine. He thanked me, but said he could not take the chance that the wine might be contaminated by any bit of wafer nearby. I was nearly undone myself. I knew that I didn't want to be the only one eating this bread and drinking this wine. Bread of life, indeed!

But Francesco has received life from the hands of those who have cared for him, in the hospital, among his family and friends and at St. James. He is not undone anymore and, in fact, offers his hands and heart to others who need them in return. He is connected to God through the love of others.

When we consume the bread of life, either literally or figuratively, we are able to offer ourselves as God's hands and heart in the world. This is not about Christians excluding others who do not share the body of Christ. This is about *people* learning to be human. We all eat something in order to live. But life that is eternal, that is life far beyond mere biological existence -- that life comes only when we allow ourselves to be consumed. May we become the body that feeds our hungry world.