

The Bread of Joy

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."

After the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, the people follow Jesus across the water to find out more about who this rabbi is and where he came from. Jesus sees immediately that their focus is on the loaves and fishes rather than on the enduring truth of his teachings. Jesus invites them to shift their focus from eating their fill of the loaves to the bread of God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

In this passage, Jesus is assuring the people, and assuring us, even assuring the world, that if we believe in him then we will never hunger and never thirst. But we know the story – we know that Jesus will be rejected and condemned by the world. We know, and we have seen, that the world put God on a cross and that the world continues to crucify Love every day. As Christians we understand deeply the anxiety and despair of this world, because we live with the ongoing awareness of crucifixion, the crucifixion of our Lord, the crucifixion of the way of love, and the suffering of all. Week after week, Episcopalians pray the Collect for Fridays: *Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace.* Christians do not deny suffering or ignore the anguish of this life, but we seek to integrate our collective pain, so that we may walk together through it and into the joy and peace of God.

When Jesus says "I am the bread of life" he invites us to enter into his joy. So through Christ even as we give ourselves to the great suffering of the world, we know that joy is the beginning and the end of the Christian life. The gospel story begins with tidings of good news of great joy for all people and ends with the return of the disciples to Jerusalem with great joy and continuous blessing. But joy is not simply happiness. Joy makes room for suffering and sadness, as it holds all things on earth and in heaven. The joy of the Lord is not an escape from suffering and despair, but an opening to the light that penetrates our anguish and anxiety and holds them through the flames of transformation. The Christian life is not a way out of suffering; it is a way through it. It is through our brokenness that we are healed. The anguish of the world breaks our hearts wide open. In the words of Rowan Williams, "Our hearts are broken to make room for others." In truth, redemptive love is born of sorrow. The kind of love that Jesus offers, the depth of tenderness that is the way of the cross, is joy-filled because it includes everything. Our pain, our regret, our failures, our brokenness. When we meet

God and one another with redemptive love, it becomes clear what is meant by not hungering or thirsting, because we are fed by the energy of God's joy.

The poet Christian Wiman describes this experience of joy arising from anguish beautifully through the experience of writing a poem shortly after a life-threatening diagnosis. He writes, "I wrote the poem one day out of anguish, emptiness, grief – and it exploded into joy. I sought refuge in the half-conscious play of language and was rescued by a weave of meaning I never meant to make. The poem taught me something, and one of the things it taught me was that if you do not 'think' of God, in whatever way you find to do that, if God has no relation to your experience, if God is not *in* your experience, then experience is always an end in itself, and always, I think, a dead end."

Experience without God is an end in itself. The bread of this world fills us but does not sustain us. It, too, is an end in itself. What gives true life to the world, what gives meaning to experience, what sustains us in eternity, is the bread of God that comes down from heaven.

Jesus tells his followers, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." In the Holy Eucharist, which is celebrated multiple times every day throughout the world, we are given the food that endures for eternal life. We are given the joy of heaven, and we are transformed by the peace of Christ so that as we re-enter our broken world, we do so as a new community, an alternative to the anxiety and despair that leaves God on the cross. The bread of life breaks through the veil of despair and offers to the world the joy and freedom of a transformed heart. With this bread we do not hunger or thirst because we are fed by the energy of redemptive love, which has the power to ignite our broken hearts with the unquenchable flame of joy. When we see by the light of joy, then we know our own brokenness and we know that God is with us in it, and with this deep knowing, we may re-enter the world free of fear. We may act from a place of trust rather than a mindset of control. And we may see, as Christian Wiman saw, that God is *in* our experience. God is the very meaning of our experience. And the joy of the Lord is the ultimate and sustaining experience; it is the bread of life.

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