

Date Preached	15-Aug-2021	Date Initiated	03-Aug-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Proper 15, Yr B

" '[T]he one who *eats this bread* will live forever.' "



I am, I think, a pretty good reader of recipes. Both the time I've spent in the kitchen *and* the disappointments I've managed to cook over the years have given me a decent ability to eyeball a list of ingredients and the steps used to prepare them and predict whether they'll produce a dish that Jim and I would enjoy eating ... and (as I'm increasingly conscious of) that will be worth the time and effort required. My recipe reading isn't foolproof, but it's still a pretty handy guide when flipping through a cookbook or the *Times'* recipe section.

As *handy* as this 'tasting-by-reading' may be, it's not, of course, a terribly satisfying way to experience food. We can imagine combinations of flavors, think about mouth-feel, critique cooking methods and predict how much we may enjoy eating this fish or that dessert, but, in the end, we are bodily creatures: Food is not primarily a 'head thing.' Over and above our biological need for tangible nutrition, we are also *sensible* creatures: We experience—and, hopefully, usually enjoy—what we eat with our full range of senses: How appealing does it look on the plate? How attractive is its aroma? Does it have an enticing sizzle or a satisfying crunch? And, finally, what does it taste like in our mouths?ⁱ It is all well-and-good to *imagine* food by reading a recipe—to conjure a belief about what it will be like, by reading how it's made—but, as the saying goes, the proof of the pudding lies in the eating.

Lest I set your stomachs growling with more gastronomic musings, let me come to our gospel reading for today—and, in fact, for the last *several* weeks. This summer, we get a big helping of the sixth chapter of St John to supplement St Mark, our usual gospel fare this liturgical year. Over the last several weeks we've been hearing Jesus talk about food—and, in particular, that most basic of western staples: bread. We began with the feeding of the five thousand. Then we heard Jesus call Himself the Bread of Life and explain that He is the Bread that has come down from Heaven—truer, He says, than the manna that fell in the wilderness. Those who eat of this Bread will have eternal life, Jesus promises, because it is His flesh that He will give for the "life of the world." In humbling Himself, in the Manger, to take imperfect humanity into the perfection of His divinity ... and in sacrificing Himself, on the Cross, to atone for all of humanity's sinful imperfections ... Jesus feeds the world the Bread of Eternity. And these bread metaphors are some of the most treasured passages in John's gospel: Christ's promise of the heavenly displacing the earthly ... the merely human becoming sublimely divine; His assurance of our full salvation and eternal life in heaven.ⁱⁱ

But now, in *today's* reading, Jesus' tone becomes earthier and more bodily tone. Up to this point, He has, according to the Greek, used a relatively bland, conventional verb for eating bread: akin to our PARTAKE or CONSUME.ⁱⁱⁱ But today, Jesus uses a different verb^{iv}: one that conveys MUNCHING or CRUNCHING or GNAWING UPON. When we feast upon the Bread of Life, He says, we should put aside our etiquette and reserve and really chow down and eat with abandon. We should throw our whole selves into what we're eating.

Until this point in John 6, Jesus has been speaking of faith mostly as a 'head thing.' A faith that hears what Jesus has to say, sees what Jesus is doing and decides to believe: a faith that's not unlike reading a recipe, sizing up its ingredients and methods and then deciding to make it because the dish sounds pretty tasty. But that's only armchair cooking ... only 'head' faith. It's a good way to get acquainted, but it's no way to taste and swallow and *enjoy* the food of Jesus. The full faith ... the bodily, living, *sensual* faith ... that Jesus wants for us is not just to hear about eternal life, but to *seize* it with our souls; it's not just knowing Him as the Son of God, but *glorifying* in Him, as the Bread of Heaven. "Go ahead!" He cries out to us. "Chomp down on Me, chew Me up and gulp Me down. Relish and savor Me. Take Me inside yourself—right into your inmost parts; mingled together with every other atom of your being—and let Me live in you and you in Me, in union ... in total union ... in communion."

And it is precisely this Bread of Heaven—the very Real Presence of Jesus within a very earthly form—that we receive every time we come to this Altar. Scripture and Prayer Book ... prayer and study: They are all sacred, and they are all good. They are recipes that instruct and assist us. Without their guidance, any faith we improvised on our own might be wholly inedible ... indigestible ... might even harm us.

But Jesus isn't *an idea*, and faith isn't *an abstraction*. That's why we gather, time and time and time again, in a great hall to enjoy a fabulous banquet. In celebration,^v we gather together with our sisters and brothers in Christ ... we speak and sing and listen; we smile and shake hands and hug. We affirm and renew our connection to Jesus by singing His praises; hearing and telling stories of Him; sharing—with Him and one another—our sorrows and concerns; and speaking His peace into truth, again. And then, when we, collectively, have set the table and laid out the finest meal in all Creation ... we come to this Altar as if to some great holiday feast: to pile our plates high and *chow down* on Him; to fill ourselves fuller than we ought with Food more delicious ... and more nutritious ... than any human hands are capable of preparing.

For we eat, at this Altar, the Bread of Life. We feast, while still mortal, on the Bread of Angels ... and we are *raised up*: into infinite oneness with God; into the Heaven-upon-earth that is Jesus. We are raised into the full existence God created us to have ... into the ethereality Christ came and died and rose to give us ... into the transformation of the Holy Spirit that means nothing that this world hurls at us can ever truly harm us, no matter what. Crunching on Christ, we are raised into Life—*true* Life—and we glimpse, fleetingly but reliably; tantalizingly but satisfyingly, that great Last Day that will mark the end of all that we have known and the beginning of all that is supposed to be. And until that great Day comes, Jesus gives us ... Jesus *is* for us ... the Bread for our journey: the very Bread of Heaven, indeed.



The Rev Douglas S Worthington
St Andrew's Parish
Kent, CT

ⁱ Our culture has a relatively narrow tolerance for *touch* when it comes to food. Especially at the dinner table, we rarely experience what we eat with our fingers. I think certain cultures (for example, in the Middle East) may have something on us here.

ii Not for nothing is John 6 among the gospel lessons the Prayer Book appoints for burials.

iii *E.g.*, φαγεῖν

iv *I.e.*, τρώγω.

v This idea of Holy Eucharist's being a celebration—a reunion and a feast; a memorial that looks to the past and a launch into the future—is why I still use the older term "celebrant" in the liturgy rather than the newer (and more theologically expansive) term "presider."