

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
August 8, 2021

Most people who meet me probably wouldn't describe me as an activist. No one hands me a megaphone at a protest, and I never receive calls to chain myself to trees or lie down in front of bulldozers. Either by age or temperament, I find that I do most of my work within organizations of some kind or another rather than lobbing dynamite from the outside.

But that was not always the case. When I was younger, I would get heated up about this cause or that cause and would be very glad to tell you all about how I was right and the organization was wrong. I sometimes miss that fire in my belly. Other times I think it's for the best.

On one such crusade, I found myself on the wrong side of the campus Christian organization at my college. The umbrella Christian group that year decided to partner with an evangelical nonprofit that made a point to ship Christmas gifts to poor kids all over the world. They had this idea that no child at Christmas time should be without a gift and that our campus group should raise money to buy toys to be shipped in time for the holidays.

To introduce this idea, they made us watch a promotional video. In the film, well-meaning US citizens would deplane in places like Guatemala and Tanzania and hand out shoeboxes filled with Christmas gifts. But the part that got me really angry was this: in picture after picture, little brown-skinned girls were given these lanky, tall, blonde and blue-eyed barbie dolls. I got really angry that we were exporting, not just toys, but Euro-centric ideas about beauty, whiteness, and femininity. It seemed to me that we were not giving what was needed. As protests often do, mine went nowhere, but I still feel pretty sure I was on the right side of that issue.

What does it feel like when the gift is so far away from what you need? Surely each of us can think of a time when we needed something and received instead its opposite. You need some empathy, and instead, you get a piece of advice. You need a long walk and the boss piles on more work. You need a compliment, and you receive criticism. There are times when the very gift you get highlights how badly you needed something else.

I think this is particularly true of food. Your body is telling you that you need food to keep you strong and to be healthy. Instead, you find yourself surrounded by Doritos, chemically altered to trick your tongue into craving chip after chip after chip. Great scientists have conspired to hijack your nervous system to move their products, and when all is said and done, you have in no way been nourished. You could find yourself in a supermarket aisle filled with food products and not one thing that is real or nourishing.

I think this is the image that Jesus has been driving at these last weeks in all of his talk about bread. Jesus is trying to get the listener to imagine what it is that divine love is like. And he lands over and over on this idea of bread. God is like real, nourishing, simple bread. The kind that our ancestors have been making since we figured out how to plant wheat. And the kind that nourished the Hebrews when it fell from heaven, and the kind that fed the disciples at the last

supper. This bread – real, fragrant, beautiful – is what Jesus is saying that divine love is. Something that we take into ourselves for real healing and the sustaining of life. Not a troubling gift. Not a fake food product. Divine love is something real that we desperately need.

I'm going to make an observation that I hope is a good reminder for all of us. Good food, my friends, is meant to be shared. It can be so easy to forget this, particularly in a church as cozy as we are. Just as a thought experiment, imagine the last time you found yourself sharing your joy about St. Mark's or inviting someone to join you at the church. We are actually pretty bad at that. I invited a friend to church just one time, and it was a special service and the poor man almost choked on the incense. Really, though, I think we are generally not great at sharing our faith, and I wonder what it is that is so frightening about it. I tell people all the time about good restaurants? I wonder what keeps me from telling others about a great parish. I want you to give this some thought this week.

And what is the good food inside this parish? Are we good at making sure that whether someone has been here one day or forty years that they are given full access to all the wonderful things about St. Mark's? Are we good at making a point to introduce ourselves to newcomers and to strengthen connections outside of our own groups of friends and comfort zones? It is no fun to eat bread alone. The bread from heaven is meant to be shared. And while I think we often do a good job with this, there is room for improvement. After all, people are hungry for the bread from God, and it seems cruel to keep it from them.

Friends, we have been given the bread from heaven, the divine love made most perfect in the person of Jesus. Take a minute to let that bread strengthen you and fill you with all the good things of God. But then make sure to share it. With those outside who may not know what is waiting for them, and also with those inside you may not know well. This food from God is love, and it is for sharing. Amen.