

Sermon Proper 14 B

St. John's Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain

Anne Mansfield Minton

Today's gospel takes us to Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is a beautiful spot. In fact, it is one of my favorite places in the Holy Land! The town is nestled along the shores of the Sea. I have been there in both the spring and the summer when the trees are in bloom and the flowering plants are lush and colorful. No new town has been built on the site so what you find are the remains of a settlement from Jesus' day. The gospels tell us that Jesus chose Capernaum for his home base after he was driven from Nazareth. There were probably lots of reasons why he chose that place but I suspect that one reason may be how beautiful it is! Standing in good repair are the remains of the synagogue where Jesus taught. Some of what is left dates to the 5th century but that structure was built on the footprint of the 1st century synagogue which was the site of many of Jesus' most important teachings, particularly this section from John's gospel on the Bread of Life.

The architecture of the synagogue reflects the centuries of Greek rule in the land. You are clearly in a Hellenized world in Capernaum. Jesus and

his early disciples lived in a multi-culturally diverse world not unlike our own. Among the remains are Greek columns with menorahs carved on them! You can still see the blackened steps from the synagogue of Jesus' day and I like to imagine when I place my foot on the step that Jesus and his disciples did as well, entering the place where they would hear God's word and where people would encounter God's word in Jesus.

As you leave the synagogue you come immediately to the excavation of a 1st century house. You can peer over the edge of the wall into what remains of a house believed from earliest times to be the home of Peter and his family. Just walking around what is left of Capernaum is exciting. It is like touching the earliest years of the Jesus movement and being at the site of some crucially important moments in our Christian history. Why am I telling you all this? Because for the next three weeks we are going to be sitting with Jesus in this synagogue in Capernaum, so I wanted you to get comfortable. Settle in! We're going to be here for a while!

Today we listen to Jesus teaching in this synagogue. We already know that it is the time of Passover so we are not surprised to hear some of the Passover themes in this discourse. Jesus tells the people that just as God gave their ancestors food in the wilderness, the manna of the Exodus, so God is now giving them the bread of life. Then the people ate and were

satisfied. In the desert of Sinai God gave them food enough to sustain their life. Until they died. Jesus' point here is that the bread that God is giving now in Jesus will not lead to their death but rather to their eternal life.

To this, Jesus' hearers begin to complain about him. If you know the Exodus story you will remember that the people in the desert also complained. There they were complaining to God because they wanted decent food, not this lousy manna. Here they are complaining about Jesus. Who does he think he is, they want to know. We know his parents, after all. What is he up to now?

What he's up to is that he's telling them their story. The story about how God not only fed the people in the wilderness, but also continued to sustain people with food. We hear this morning about Elijah who went a day's journey, ran out of energy and curled up under a tree to die. I've had days like that. I bet you have had them, too! An "Enough, already!" kind of day. But God is having none of it. God sends an angel and cake and water and gets Elijah to eat. And eat again on the next day. God gives Elijah food enough to sustain him on his journey. To go forty days and forty nights, just like the Israelites who went forty years, to encounter God at Mt. Horeb as Moses encountered God at Mt. Sinai. Food for the journey.

We have the past- the manna to get you through one day in the wilderness. We have the present. Food for the journey. Food to take you from this place today to the mountain where you will meet God. And now Jesus is promising his hearers the food of eternity. The food that is faith in Jesus. We have both a memory and a hope in these words of Jesus. A remembrance of all that God has done by feeding us in the past, gratitude for the sustenance being offered today for our journey and the promise of a heavenly banquet. In Jewish literature there are references to God's giving food again, like manna, when the Messiah comes. Food provided by God will be one of the signs of the messianic age. Here Jesus stirs up that hope and links the food that he will give with resurrection and eternal life.

John's gospel is full of the belief that the new age, the messianic time, has broken in upon us already. God's future has come barreling down on us in the present. We have our feet firmly planted in two worlds, two realities- the present moment and the age of come. One foot in one and one in the other. And we are standing upright and secure because the God of the present moment is the God of the age to come. The food for our journey today is at the same time the bread of heaven. It is the same God. It is the same Christ.

So as you gather around the altar this morning and as I come to you and hand you the host and say to you, “the Body of Christ, the bread of heaven,” what I am saying and what you are agreeing to when you say “Amen,” is that the food that God will give you today in Jamaica Plain is a reminder of all God’s food that has sustained you in the past- all God’s grace and mercy and forgiveness given to you. And it is the bread you will need for today- strength and courage and joy to carry you along on your journey toward God. And it is the bread of heaven- an appetizer, if you will, a foretaste of the banquet that will never come to an end when with Jesus, the Risen One, you and I will share in his resurrected life.

We live with memory and hope simultaneously. We dwell in the past and the present and the future all at once. And we do this because of God’s gifts- especially because of God’s gift to us in Jesus who is drawing us to himself. Day after day. Meal after meal. Until the day God calls us home and invites us to sit down at the banquet that will never come to an end. May God be praised!