

## Sermon, Proper 13B, August 1, 2021, Jane A. Beebe

‘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.”’ (John 6:35)

In today’s Gospel reading from John, Jesus makes one of his wonderful “I am” statements. A lot is conveyed in just a few words. When we hear about God calling Moses to lead the people out of Egypt in the book of Exodus, Moses wants to know what to say to the Israelites. ‘[He says to God], “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”’ [Then] God [says] to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He [says] further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”’ First, in just two words, *I am*, Jesus is saying that he and the Father are one. They share this “I am-ness.” This is encoded in the Nicene Creed when we declare that it is through Christ that “all things are made.” Jesus is claiming his identity as the source of life.

Second, Jesus says, “I am the bread...” Many, many sermons have been preached on how fundamental bread is to human life. On one level it is real food that nourishes our bodies. On another, it is that which sustains our souls, no matter what physical condition, or circumstance we may be in. It is no wonder that after the feeding of the five thousand, the people that remain seek out Jesus and the disciples. I understand their yearning. Having enough to eat is no trivial want. They get into boats themselves and cross to Capernaum to find Jesus. Perhaps

having tasted something so real, and without knowing what they are looking for, they follow after. I have prayed like that, haven't you? Sometimes I do not know what it is that I truly need. There is no shame in seeking it out, even if somewhat blindly. We may intuit that there must be something beyond, without being able to name it. Jesus responds by offering "food that endures for eternal life."

The people who have sought out Jesus make the connection with the Exodus story of their ancestors who received daily manna from heaven. Wonderfully, the text in Exodus says that God tells Moses he is going to *rain* bread from heaven. (Exodus 16:4) This suggests not just abundance: there will be enough. Rain in the desert causes all kinds of blossoming. This bread is life itself. The people are to gather enough for each day. They even receive a double portion on the sixth day so there is enough on the Sabbath. This narrative is essential to the peoples' understanding of their relationship with God. Jesus shifts and expands its meaning. He tells them that this is not just a story from their past history, compelling as it is. It is true of their present as well. God gave them bread, certainly; God continues to give true bread in the here and now. By telling them this, Jesus addresses their anxiety that the feeding of the five thousand was somehow a one-time event. God has been raining bread on them—and us as well.

When I was contemplating the texts for this week, it was a word in the collect that struck me. That word is "continual." During liturgies of the Holy

Eucharist, the collect appears at the beginning of the service. It is meant to literally **collect** our thoughts and prayers as we begin worship. It can give us a clue or a key to focus our minds and hearts on the word. In today's collect we pray for God's "continual mercy." Another of my very favorite collects in the Book of Common Prayer is for Clergy and People. It has the line: "...Pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing..." (BCP, p. 817) We have had a surfeit of rain lately, yet there is something comforting in a gentle, soaking rain. Here are some meanings of the word "continual": frequently occurring, always happening, having no interruptions. Is that not our hope for the bread of life?

On June 21 I gratefully marked twenty years of sobriety from debt. There is a book that helped me then by Jerrold Mundis called *How to Get Out of Debt, Stay Out of Debt, and Live Prosperously*. At first I was only interested in the first thing: how to get out of debt. Mundis assured me that I would not lack *if I worked the program*, and that miracles are commonplace. I wasn't sure about any of that. Trust came slowly. As you all know, one of the ways I maintain sanity, sobriety, and health is by walking. That has also been a twenty-year journey. You might think there is a connection—and you would be right. I needed something that didn't need expensive equipment, that helped me feel the nearness of God, and that I could do daily, *continually*. I began to learn about that "continual dew of blessing."

It's hard to hold your head up when you have something as shame-producing as debt. I realize on some of those early walks that I looked on the ground a lot. God responded by showing me beauty in small things. Just recently I saw a tiny turtle on the edge of the path. It was perfect, just very small. It had probably just emerged from the nearby ponds. On one walk early in my recovery I found an ear of corn on the bike path. I am not sure how it came to be there. I speculated that maybe someone had picked up some farm produce, had it in their bike basket, and one ear fell out. It did not look to have been there long; it was lying lightly on top of the grass by the path. It seemed perfectly fresh; there was nothing wrong with it. Occasionally I had found small amounts of money—once a five-dollar bill. Yet this seemed like a more direct kind of sign. Corn is a grain after all. This was my “manna from heaven” moment. I took the ear of corn home, and ate it. It was the most gentle of cosmic jokes. I would have enough. God was, and is, my source.







