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 Proper 14B: John 6:37-51; Ephesians 4:30-5:2
 St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis
 August 9, 2009

For a King

Perhaps it is no accident that our readings this month focus on Jesus as the bread of life who wants to satisfy our hunger. This is August – the month when tomatoes finally taste like *tomatoes*; when corn ripens on the cob. Fresh picked tomatoes, mingled with fresh basil and garlic, and corn on the cob, spread with butter and sprinkled with salt, make, in my opinion, the perfect summer meal.

Time goes fast though: tomato vines wither, corn stalks dry and are plowed back into the soil. *Now* is the time to enjoy. *Now* is the time to satisfy our hunger for these simple, glorious foods.

While we were still dating, the man who became my husband told me an astonishing thing. He said, “There is nothing like a Jersey tomato. And the sweet, Silver Queen corn grown in New Jersey is the best you will ever taste.”

I was amazed. I am from Wisconsin. A Midwestern, farming state. A state which helps to feed the nation. A state which takes its food, and its food consumption seriously. Joe is from New Jersey, where I had never been. I knew its motto was “the Garden State,” but the only picture I had in my mind’s eye of New Jersey was its famed Turnpike. Tomatoes? Sweet Corn? Really. What exit? I thought I had found the flaw in the otherwise wonderful, brilliant, marvelous man with whom I was falling in love.

I now stand corrected. And humbled. Joe and I married, almost 19 years ago now, and moved to New Jersey to go to seminary. We got to spend three summers enjoying those succulent Jersey tomatoes and that Silver Queen corn which hardly needs butter. I now know I was wrong, and that my mistake was making a judgment about something based on where it was from. I let my preconceptions keep me from seeing the surprising truth.

The crowd around Jesus in today’s gospel lesson makes a similar mistake. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life that came down from heaven.” Really? Isn’t this Joseph and Mary’s son? Isn’t he from Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth? How can he say he is bread from heaven? How can he be the bearer of God’s promise? Who does he think he is? The crowd lets their preconceptions about what God can accomplish cloud their ability to see the truth: Jesus is from Nazareth and he is sent from heaven. Jesus is truly human and truly God – God made flesh and God made flesh for a purpose: to feed us, to satisfy our hunger, to satisfy the hunger of our hearts, because we cannot live by bread alone.

Jesus offers bread that gives eternal life. “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever,” says Jesus, “and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” With those words, Jesus points to the Eucharist, the sacrament of his blood shed for us and body given for us. Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the second century, called the Eucharist, “the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which wards off death, but yields continuous life in union with Jesus Christ.”

The eternal life we have in Christ is both a life beyond this one -- in which the frailties of this life, the need for food to feed our bodies, and all illness, pain and weakness will be left behind -- and an abundant life in this one – “a life in union with Jesus Christ,” as Ignatius says. A life of joy and peace that undergird and uphold us in any sadness or struggles, a life in which we can dare to be, as we hear in our second reading for today, “imitators of God,” God’s “beloved children.”

Jesus feeds us with food that nourishes us for a particular way of life. Ephesians describes our manner of life in this way, “putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors . . . Be angry, but do not sin . . . Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up . . . so that your words may give grace to those who hear . . . Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

What a vision for what a Christian community can be – how we can treat one another. “See how they love one another” was what people who saw the earliest Christians said and flocked to join in that way of life.

Jesus, the bread of life, nourishes us so we can “be imitators of God,” God’s beloved children. God’s wisdom for us this morning is to be ourselves – be the forgiven, grace-filled, beloved people of God God has made us in Christ. When we know who we are, when we claim our identity, we can live from our identity, live in ways that reflect our identity.

William Willimon, a bishop in the Methodist church, told this story about a young friend of his. He said, “It was Clayton’s fourth birthday. And because four years old is a special age, his mother told him that he could have any kind of birthday party he wished. “I want a party where everybody there will be kings and queens,” he replied without a moment’s hesitation. His wish was granted.

His mother set to work and made a score of golden paper crowns, royal blue robes, and scepters made from coat hangers and cardboard. As the guests arrived for the party, they were delighted to receive royal crowns, robes, and scepters. Everyone at the party was either a king or a queen, and everyone had a great time. They enjoyed cake and ice cream. They had a majestic procession up to the end of the block and back. All looked like kings and queens. All believed they were kings and queens. And all acted like kings and queens, behaving in a most regal manner.

That night, when the guests had gone home and Clayton was being tucked into bed by his mother, Clayton said, “I wish everyone in the whole world could be a king or a queen – not just on my birthday, but everyday.”

Actually, something very much like that has happened for us in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we can become aware of this reality – we are no less than beloved children of God, no less than the family of our heavenly King, no less than royalty ourselves.

Once, when I was leading an instructed Eucharist for the children of my parish, I showed the chalice used for communion to the children. “Wow!” said one of the little boys, “that looks like the kind of cup a king would drink out of.” Yes. It is.

At St. Anne’s, we really get to take that literally. Our communion chalice is inscribed with the king’s seal. But the king who drinks from this cup is not King William, even if he donated the silver. It is you, beloved child.

At communion we are reminded of who we are, strengthened for service, for a way of life in which we can live in love as Christ loved us. We are given the body and blood of Christ, for fullness of joy, in this life and the world to come.

Amen.