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Proper 15 B: I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

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Really that Simple

If you have been worshipping over the last few weeks here or in any church that uses the lectionary readings, then you know that this is week number three of Jesus saying, "I am the bread of life." And perhaps you also feel a little bit like me, "okay, Jesus, I get it. You are the bread of life." But perhaps Jesus isn't repeating himself for the sake of repetition. Maybe he's repeating himself so we will actually get it: really, Jesus is the bread of life. It's that simple: Choose him. Feed on him. Be satisfied. Have eternal life. Want to know what life is all about? Jesus is the bread of life.

Can life really be that simple? Choose Jesus and live forever? Enjoy Jesus and feel satisfied? Sometimes we like to make things more complicated. Ecclesiastes, one of the wisdom books of the bible, knows this. At one point it says, in Today's English Version, "This is all that I have learned: God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated" (Ecclesiastes 7:29). What if Jesus is telling us, as simple and straightforward, as basic as bread is – this is what I am, this is how straightforward my promises are. Trust. Choose me. Eat and live. Not complicated. Any hungry person can do it.

Author, pastor, and artist Jan Richardson talks about an experience she had in a church. A member of the church is a young man who has a syndrome that affects his cognitive abilities. "Among the challenges this poses, both for him and those around him, is that he sometimes makes some pretty bad choices for himself and this has sometimes made his road pretty rough."

At a recent worship service, the church celebrated the ordination of one of its pastors and this young man was among those who spoke. He said the pastor had helped him understand how God wants us to make things easier for ourselves, not harder. God wants to make things easier for us, not harder. Richardson writes, "I am a creature drawn to complication. Given the choice between making the way easy and making the way difficult, I . . . tilt toward difficulty. I've learned my soul often needs to have something to push against, something to forge and form it. I feel kind of like Jacob sometimes; occasionally I need a heated wrestling match with the divine, a struggle that will help me find a new name.

"There's a difference, though, between the complications and complexities that forge the soul and those that drain it. I can wax poetic about the holy disruptions that have deepened me, but I recognize, too, my capacity for choosing complications that stem from some other, less sacred impulse. There are times when I make the way difficult for myself because I've taken on too much, or because I'm avoiding something that needs attention, or because I'm giving too much energy to something that I don't need to be giving that energy to. I recognize that I'm capable of manufacturing my own

complications rather than waiting for the ones that come around naturally in traveling with Christ.”ⁱ

Traveling with Christ will bring its own complications. Sue Monk Kidd wrote, “I often need permission to do daring things. And when I can’t get it from myself, God often sends someone else to give it to me. A friend said to me, “If you think God leads you only beside still waters, think again. God will also lead you beside turbulent waters. If you have the courage to enter, you’ll think you’re drowning. But actually, you’re being churned into something new. It’s okay . . . dive in.”ⁱⁱ Jesus invites us to take up our cross and follow him, not take a bubble bath and relax. So the simplicity and straightforwardness of holding out our hands and receiving Jesus the bread of life does not mean a life of ease. But our readings today do point to a simplicity, a straightforwardness, a life-giving way that is ours if we only choose to take it. Look at this:

Solomon found himself king and his knees may have been knocking just a bit when he realized what a big job he had. When God asked him what he would like from God Solomon asks for one thing: wisdom to govern the people well. Not wisdom so everyone would think he was wise, “that Solomon! So smart!” Rather, he wanted wisdom to lead, to serve the community well. I choose wisdom, says Solomon. God gives him that, and more, and the promise: walk in my ways. Follow my statutes and commandments and I will give you a long life. Choose wisdom.

Ephesians lays out for us straightforward wisdom for how to live as a Christian community. It says, Choose wisdom over foolishness. Choose the delight that comes from a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. Choose the joy that comes from a life of praise, gathering with others for worship, joining our voices together in song, offering thanks to God at all times and for everything. Choose wisdom.

And in our Gospel lesson, here’s Jesus, offering himself as bread and wine, body and blood, the Eucharist, the meal offered at God’s table. God’s table has its own wisdom too, a simple, straightforward wisdom. The wisdom of God’s table is this: there is always room for everyone at the table and every place at this table is a place of honor. A place at the table is not something you earn. All are welcome. The only requirement to receive the sacrament is baptism, and that’s so simple even a baby can do it. This dinner is always come as you are. We learn at this table that there is no such thing as being too little, too poor, too broken, too messed up, too unimportant to be loved and share God’s love with others. If you allow it, this one simple meal will change your life.

Maybe it’s the simplicity of this meal that makes it so important. In a life of complications and complexities -- those that come from traveling with Jesus, and those of our own making, those that help forge our souls and shape our character, and those that we create to try to ward off growth in love -- into the midst of this life comes Jesus who says, come to me and I will be all you need. Eat this bread and live forever.

Here's a story about how simple it really is. Tom Long shared this story about a woman describing the death of her father. Her father, she said, was a proud man who spent all his days tilling the soil of a Carolina farm and all his Sabbaths praising God for life and seed and family. A final bout with cancer sent him to the hospital never to come home again, and in the last week of his life the disease caused the added indignity of a stroke that robbed him of his speech. His eyes would moisten with frustration and grief as he tried in vain to speak to these people he loved so dearly. When it seemed clear that his time here was short, his attending physician issued the signal, the family gathered in his room – his daughter and her two brothers. With strength fading, the father motioned to his son that he wanted a glass of water. The son hurried to the sink and returned with a full water glass and helped it toward his father's lips. But the old man pushed the glass away and moved his finger from the glass toward his son, as if to say, You drink it. Hesitant and uncertain, the son lifted the glass to his lips and drank from it. Then the father motioned toward his daughter, indicating that she should drink some too. Sensing what his father wanted the son passed the glass to his sister and she drank. Now the father pointed toward the other son and the daughter realized what was happening. He is serving communion. He is sharing this last and holy meal with us.

There in the face of death, the reminder of Jesus' feast of life. Eat. Drink. Love. Live. It's really that simple.

ⁱ Jan Richardson, <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/07/02/if-the-yoke-fits/>. Richardson's website is a wonderful source of inspiration and thoughtful reflection on the gospel readings.

ⁱⁱ Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions* (Harper San Francisco, 1990), 10.