

“The String”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
9th Sunday after Pentecost -- 2 August 2009
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Like beads on a string, the scripture from Exodus, Ephesians, and John are held together by a common core that runs through each of them, the loving generosity of God. When the Israelites find themselves hungry in the wilderness, God sends flocks of quail in the evening and a mysterious bread-like substance in the morning. Far from filet mignon with asparagus on the side, the food proves sufficient to satisfy the hunger and sustain the strength of the chosen people during their flight from bondage in Egypt.

Without this essential nourishment, it appears likely their frustration would have burst their fragile community into pieces. Some of them were desperate enough to consider submission once more to bondage under the hand of a cruel and capricious Pharaoh in Egypt. At least there, they wouldn't be allowed to starve. Their labor proved too valuable for that. But in the wilderness, God shows them that they have intrinsic value, separate from and superior to their usefulness as human brick-making machines. The food that floats down from the heavens is pure gift: offered and accepted, not earned.

Paul, too, writes of how God showers gifts upon the people He calls. In this case, the people who call upon God receive gifts of the Spirit for ministry, rather than food. However, the purpose of the blessing appears the same. Just as the Israelites had been held together by the miraculous provision of food in a desert, the people of Ephesus were “joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped,” namely those ministry gifts Paul wrote about. In other words, they were given by God what was most needful for their common life, and those

spiritual gifts for ministry, shared in concert, held them together in peace and love in a way very similar to how the manna and quail kept their ancestors in Sinai from fleeing freedom and returning to the relative comforts afforded by slavery.

Likewise, with John's story about Jesus by the shore with the crowd who had followed him across to the other side of the sea. Recall that the miraculous feeding of the five-thousand had just taken place. Still, those who follow Jesus are full of questions, seeking signs for proof that will confirm their belief. They want to know what to do to make God happy. These questions, in hindsight, seem ridiculous and impertinent. It is almost as if they were saying, "That whole feast for 5,000 out of five loaves and two fish was awfully impressive, Jesus, but what else have you got?"

Jesus does not answer their questions, but he responds by: 1. scolding them for their motives ("you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves"); 2. encouraging their faith, "this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent"); and 3. offering himself as the sole sign necessary for belief and the sole substance necessary for survival.

In his reply, Jesus pegs us pretty good ,too. We often seek him out when we need mercy, relief from something unbearable, like doubt – a form of spiritual hunger -- or fear. There's nothing wrong with seeking out such help from Jesus. In fact, he welcomes us gladly. It shows our trust in Jesus and our dependence upon him. However, there's so much more beyond what we usually seek.

Indeed, all that we need, all we rightly desire, comes from Jesus, the man John describes as "the Word made flesh," the very organizing principle of all creation, the thread that holds the universe together. Jesus hopes we might move beyond our obsession with what to do and how to

do it, so that we may become and eventually be more like him. Notice the emphasis on being rather than doing, because to do right, we must be right, and to be right, we must be with Jesus. When we abide in him and he abides in us, the natural fruit of our rootedness in the soil of salvation will be works of the proper kind, namely works that nourish others in the Spirit. An apple tree, to take a common example, doesn't "work on" producing apples. Apple trees bear apples because they are apple trees. Bearing fruit of the Spirit that endures requires us simply to be of the Spirit, which is gift we accept, never a distinction we deserve.

Jesus wants to quench our thirst for proof and certainty with the refreshing water of his unfathomable mystery. Jesus is eager to soothe our regrets for the past and calm our anxieties about the future and the present moment, by showing how all three – past, present, and future – are united in him into one sublime eternity. It is almost as if Jesus answers our question, "what else have you got," with the paradoxical retort: nothing and everything. Jesus has nothing of what we desperately seek, but he possesses everything when it comes to what we truly need.

This is what Jesus means when he tells the crowd on the shore about "the food that endures for eternal life," when he says, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." It isn't that those who follow Jesus will literally never again suffer a parched mouth or stomach pangs. It isn't that Jesus provides perfectly preserved food that would put freeze-dried, homogenized, vacuum-packed food to shame. What Jesus speaks of, in a somewhat mysterious way, is how his presence with us holds everything together, when the world threatens to tear us apart.

Jesus speaks about how being with him leads us to make wise choices and gives us the courage to follow through on them, despite the resistance and danger those choices may elicit from others. Jesus speaks about how we can transcend our hunger and thirst. By being aware of

Jesus and trusting wholly in him, we can endure the suffering of life without perceiving them to be the end of the world.

It isn't that the suffering isn't real. It most certainly is. And it isn't that Jesus wants us to suffer. He doesn't. It is simply that suffering happens as part of our natural human condition, and when we partake of the bread which is Jesus himself, we become part of someone who has "been there, done that," even when it comes to death itself, and made it out fine. Actually, Jesus made it out better than just fine. He exited the grave renewed, transformed, and triumphant, and so will we; so will we, to the extent we accept the gift God offers and take part in the feast by bringing Jesus into our lives, so that what endures forever may become quite literally ingrained in who we are.

This is all heady stuff. Perhaps I've done nothing more than make a bigger mess out of a set of perplexing passages from scripture. But when we reflect on the mysteries of life, the universe, and everything, it takes a little more effort than figuring out how Flap A fits into Slot B. The truth of life everlasting with Jesus Christ is a reality we have to live with in order to appreciate, and we'll never understand it fully, though we don't really need to.

What's important to recall is how faithful God has been, how giving, throughout millennia, often toward people very much like us. People who are mixed: both at the same time desperate and patient, headstrong and open, ungrateful and thankful, oblivious and perceptive, and scared and calm. We need to remember the quail and the manna. We need to remember the gifts of the Spirit laid upon the Ephesians for the purpose of the common good. And above all, we need to remember the eternal life promised to those who believe.

We need to remember that the string holding everything together is one big continuous gift from God, and if we've got the humility to accept that gift with grace and the guts to peel off

the wrapping, we may just find ourselves with more than we expected, more than we imagined possible, possibly with more than we'd care to handle. But in the end, and well before that, in the here and now, we get forever, or at least a foretaste of forever: the ultimate in gifts that keep on giving. And that's not too bad. Not bad at all. Amen.