

St. Paul's Congregational Church
August 5, 2018: Exodus 16:2-15; John 6:24-35
The Bread of Life – 13B
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

You never know that God is all you need when God is all you have. And there are some events in ministry that you never forget – today's date and the steaming heat bring one of those times all back like it happened yesterday. 6 years ago on a dreadfully hot Saturday afternoon over 200 people, most of them very young, gathered in the Glen Ridge sanctuary to celebrate the life of one of their own – 22 year old Clay Burroughs – a member of the Confirmation Class of 2004 – who was killed in a car accident in Florida. The football team came in their jerseys – one of the speakers was his football coach - his friends and their families, neighbors were there – Clay's mother and grandparents - there were profoundly moving testimonies of the impact Clay had on their lives.

There was a terrible shock in the suddenness of his death – for many of his friends it was the first time they'd encountered the death of someone they knew, much less such a tragic death, the loss of a friend their age. But the service was a wonderful celebration of his life – filled with great stories of Clay's life among us - on and off the football field – lots of laughter and lots of tears in the sanctuary that day.

Word of Clay's death spread quickly on the Friday of the accident in late July– thanks to social networking – shock and grief spread through the town. Almost immediately a tribute page was established on Facebook – hundreds of entries were there by the end of the weekend. And on the following Monday morning, our church secretary contacted me while I was still on vacation - some of his classmates had come to the office and wanted to know if we would do a Glen Ridge Memorial Service here at this church in August. Of course we would and I asked her to give this group of young people my email address. Within an hour I had an email from one of the group – vacation flies out the window when there's a crisis such as this in our life together.

Over the phone and via email this group of classmates and I communicated about the service and on my first day back, I met with them to finalize plans for the memorial. Through the entire process I was truly

impressed with their thoughtfulness – they picked hymns, chose some scripture passages and the speakers.

Somehow they knew that social networking, talking together, sharing memories, while important, wasn't enough. They wanted to come to God's house, to the sanctuary where Clay had grown up, was confirmed, to celebrate his life. They wanted to gather as God's people – regardless of religious tradition – in a sacred place, hear scripture, sing songs, remember their friend – somehow they knew that hope lives here. And they yearned to hear the good news that's here for all of us – we ended the service with the hymn, "Here I Am, Lord" – a statement of faith and a dedication, a commitment to go out into the world grounded in God's eternal love for us. Lots of tears then – but it was sacred water washing over all of us.

Frederick Buechner says, "No matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us."

For some of those who were in that steamy sanctuary, their world had been shattered to pieces – but they saw, felt, that vision of wholeness and moved toward it.

You never know that God is all you need until God is all you have. God is enough!

Our scripture this morning touches that perspective, I think. I've always loved the story of manna from heaven – those complaining, ungrateful Israelites and their "murmuring" – a nice word, isn't it. But through all their trials, they had enough, thanks to the abundance, the outrageous generosity of a God who loved them, even when they didn't realize it!

Bread – a very basic food for much of the world – but also a symbol of the basic necessities of life. For the Israelites it was the manna God provided them – just enough for their needs. In fact, when the Israelites took more than enough it rotted! Interesting concept, isn't it. Lots of implications for us who live in a consumer driven world.

Bread as food: if only everyone in the world could have their fill every day. If only we with so much bread could and would share it with those who have none. The world food supply is more than enough to feed every man, woman, and child on the planet. Yet thousands die each day for lack of food. Closer to home, we hear constantly about the scarcity in food banks at this time of year. We know that children no longer have access to school breakfast and lunch in the summer but donations are way down now. Every time we do a Food Distribution here we thank God for the generosity of this town during the Boy Scout Food Drive in the spring – we are still

giving out those donations – but they are going fast. Other Food Banks are not as fortunate – and I can't help but ask the question - how is it, why is it, that this happens every summer? I wish I had an answer.

The only thing I can say is that I admit I've gotten careless about my own efforts to get something for the Food Bank every time I go to the grocery store – no more. And that struck me when I compared responding to the crisis at the food bank with how those young people responded to the crisis of the death of their friend: Jesus is offering us the bread to give us the strength to live our lives fully every day, whether we're in crisis or not. I wish it didn't so often take a crisis to get our attention but I guess that's the human way.

In our fears, insecurities, distractions in our own lives, it is so easy to miss the deeper meaning of things – it is so easy to focus our attention on the gratification of our immediate physical needs that we forget there are greater things – things that satisfy not only the body but also the soul. Maybe vacation times – Sabbath times – can help us slow down and see this.

Literally, it was more food, that the crowd wanted when they went looking for Jesus on the other side of the lake – right after he'd fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish – the crowd followed him, hungry again. Jesus says to them: “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.”

To come to Jesus only for the bread that satisfies our bodies one day and leaves us hungry the next, to turn to him only for the physical and immediate blessings of this world is to miss the significance of who Jesus is, and indeed to miss the significance of what life itself is all about. Jesus tells them, tells us, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” And then comes the great “I am” statement – I am the bread of life.”

This certainly has implications for life together as church – as the Body of Christ. You who are here today on this hot Sunday in August perhaps understand these implications. Maybe this is what makes you leave the comfort of home and come here - we are seeking that food that endures forever and we know that's a 24 hour/7 day a week effort. Our involvement in the Body of Christ is not limited to Sunday mornings during the school year. Our involvement in the Body of Christ is not a part-time job, separated from our whole life process. It's all intertwined, isn't it – and being here in community gives us the strength to continue on this awesome journey of life where we are called to seek first the Realm of God. Everything else is secondary.

Aren't those radical thoughts in today's world – in a world where we can feel disoriented, overwhelmed, sad, disgusted, frustrated, even frightened. The church has always been countercultural and today that's so very clear. Here we offer a radical hospitality, an extravagant welcome, a radical safety here as we gather where everyone is accepted as a child of God, created in God's image, where everyone is loved, where everyone has gifts to share. And we offer radical good news. Good news that can feed our deepest hungers.

How wonderful that those 200+ young people experienced that at Clay's service – some of them were church goers, some not – but by their attention to what was being said, to the prayers, to the hymns – it says, they were aware on some level something might be missing in their lives, that there is a hole in the soul that the world just can't fill. How do we continue to reach out to them and to so many others who are hurting?

The crowd in John's passage see Jesus as a simple wonder-worker, as one who can perform signs and fill stomachs. And Jesus is that. But he also knew that the bread of this earth does not satisfy – that men, women, and children will go after it and keep looking for more – just like they did with the manna in the wilderness.

John wants us to know that Jesus came to feed us with what lasts forever. That Jesus came to give us the Bread of heaven; that Jesus is in fact the bread of heaven – the one who, if we believe in him, is able to nourish us forever; Jesus, the one who is, in fact, the bread of life.

I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never go hungry, and those who believe in me will never be thirsty.

Our world today is not so different from so long ago. Clearly there are more important things to seek than the bread of this world which spoils and rots. Clearly there is more to life than the pursuit of earthly pleasures that just don't last. Clearly there is more to life than being so wrapped up in our own business, our own stuff, that we don't think about and respond to our neighbors in need. When we do stop and think about it, or when we're faced with the tragic death of a young friend, or any other tragedy in our lives, we know it in our heart. Something is missing. The hole in our soul remains empty. And there is only one thing that can fill it. All we have to do is accept it. Accept the Bread of Life into our lives.

We are called by God – the giver of life – to eat the bread of life - that bread provided by God in Christ Jesus. As we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper today, we celebrate how the Bread of Life is broken – and given to all who are at the table – so all may eat and live.

Where people are being oppressed, this table speaks of exodus or deliverance from any kind of bondage.

Where discrimination by ethnicity, gender, or class or any other kind of bias is a danger for the community, for the world, the table of Christ enables all people – all people – to partake of the one food and to be made one people.

Where people are affluent and at ease with life, the Bread and the Cup say, just as Christ shares his life, we are to share what we have with the hungry.

Where people are hurting, the Bread and the Cup give strength, courage, nourishment – a radical outpouring of the love God has for all of us.

Today, let us be set free to live, nurtured with bread that is more than bread, flying free on wings of daring hope. Let us follow the flights of the Spirit, grounded in a faith that calls us on to reach beyond where we have ever been before, beyond where we have ever dreamed. We never know that God is all we need until God is all we have. Blessed be the name of God, day by day. Amen.