

St. Paul's Cathedral, San Diego  
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost / Proper 14, Yr. B RCL  
August 9, 2009  
John 6: 35, 41-51  
Ephesians 4:25-5:2  
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One day at the busy County Library branch where I work, I asked my boss about the meeting she'd had with our regional manager the previous afternoon. "How'd it go?"

"Not well." This surprised me, as our regional librarian is usually very supportive and encouraging.

"I started off telling her all the things we'd discussed at staff meeting—how we can't keep on providing this level of service for this many hours per week with this few staff. That the latest cut to the budget for temporary workers is really the straw that will break us. But then I heard what *she* had to say. There's been another revision of the budget, even worse than the one we got last week, and there will be more rounds of cuts after that. But we're still going to be increasing the number of hours we're open, because there's such demand. I started out the meeting determined to convince her that we need more staff. I ended the meeting just thankful any of us have jobs at all! I tell you, I look at what our future holds, and I'm exhausted just thinking about it.

"And, you need to call the two temps we hired in March, and tell them we won't be giving them any more work. They're both hurting financially and counting on the income we've been providing. We need to let them know so they can look for other work."

Similar scenes, and many much worse, have played out thousands of times in offices over the past year. Scarcity, anxiety and stress pervade the air. There are few of us who have not suffered some sort of financial loss in this recession.

When even the most secure jobs are at risk, when even the most conservative, well-balanced portfolios plummet, when retirement accounts carefully built up over decades vanish, it is totally understandable that people begin to focus solely on their own security. Everyone finds themselves wondering, "Will I be next? If the worst happens, what will we live on? Where are we to buy bread to eat?"

Fear and scarcity are the enemies of generosity and faith.

When our own survival feels threatened, we see any other claims on us as a magnified threat. A cursory scan of the Opinions section of any newspaper shows this.

"We shouldn't have to spend money on "x." They don't deserve it. If we didn't have to spend money on them, there would be plenty for the rest of us."

For “x” you can fill in any number of groups. Undocumented immigrants. Those without health insurance. Those who ‘take advantage’ of government services. Those who work for the government and receive too-generous pensions. Bank CEOs. Auto executives.

And sometimes the threats are real, not exaggerated. Students must drop out of college because banks will no longer make loans or enrollments are being capped. Workers are laid off and exhausting their unemployment. Well-qualified job-seekers are turned away because the job they would have been offered will not be filled. People dare not leave jobs which are crushing their soul, for fear of not finding anything else. For many people, “Where am *I* to buy bread to eat?” is not a rhetorical question. The scarcity is real and the fear understandable.

But those stories of fear and anxiety in the face of scarcity are not the *only* stories we hear. Very different stories also echo among the walls of *this* sacred place. We hear stories of a God who loves us so much he took on human flesh to reach us. Jesus came that we might have abundant life. God cares about our daily bread, our daily life, and also about the health and wholeness of all those around us. Christ healed the sick, lifted up the outcast, fed the hungry. Jesus took that flesh all the way to the humiliation of the cross, and through death to resurrection and new life. He promises us that same new life.

*Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Those who eat this bread will have eternal life.”*

Just as we heard Paul reminding the church in Ephesus, we have been baptized into the Body of Christ, and made members of the household of God. We are members one of another and of Christ. *We are to be imitators of God, to live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

Here are some of the stories of *this* place....

There are increasing demands on food banks but the Cathedral doesn’t have as much money to give to outreach. Some concerned members suggested that while we can’t give more money from our budget, maybe, if we really stretched, we could collect one ton of food. One ton? This congregation responded with over one and three-quarters tons!

*Jesus said, ‘I am the bread of life.’*

Those who work for inclusion of our GLBT members in society and the church realized that this year’s witness at General Convention, and at Pride, would be especially important. But how to fund it in a lean budget year? Thanks to the generosity of the organizers and attendees, the Midsummer’s Night Gala raised twice as much money as hoped.

*For we are members of one another.*

As companies roll back their budgets, we are asked to do more and more at our jobs and have less flexible schedules. Yet this year several people from this congregation each gave hundreds of hours to the meetings of the Diocesan Task Force on Holiness in Relationships, because they felt the Diocese needed their witness. Look at the results—a report that already has moved this diocese forward tremendously.

*For we are members of one another.*

In mid-2008, with the combined impacts of the 2007 wildfires, the economic collapse, and the loss of their President, the Board of Dorcas House, our foster home in Tijuana, feared they would not be able to meet their budget, and they prepared the House staff for salary cuts. But they also went out and told the stories of young people graduating from high school with academic awards, siblings being reunited, children receiving medical care and counseling. Stories of healing, reconciliation, new life, hope. The people who heard the stories gave, many in small amounts, but even more importantly, they also told the story of Dorcas House to their friends, who told their friends. The small amounts added up. Other parishes, that already give generously to meet tremendous needs in other places—Tucson and Belize and El Salvador and Kenya—felt called to add Dorcas House to their efforts. 2008 donations for Dorcas House actually exceeded their budget.

*Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life.'*

This morning after the 10:30 service we will wish Godspeed to three members of the Cathedral staff who are moving on to ministries elsewhere. Nan is leaving to train in tropical medicine, which will enable her to serve in even more missionary capacities. Torrey is leaving to study Peace and Justice issues. Braden is embarking on a full-time career as a church musician. Several other members of our Cathedral staff continue to work for us for much less money and fewer benefits than they received in their previous, secular positions.

Then there are those in this congregation, close to half a dozen people, who are discerning if they are called to ordination or other dedicated ministries, ministries often requiring graduate level schooling, almost all having to be paid for by loans from banks or retirement savings.

None of these moves could be described as climbing a career ladder. None offers financial security.

*Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.'*

I was talking with one of the Cathedral staff members who gives time and dedication far beyond what any similarly-compensated position in the secular world could ever expect, asking how they do it. "I look at the other people in the offices around me—the decades of service, the wisdom, the compassion, the faith. And I look at all the people in the

pews, who give so generously of their time as well as their money, to support the ministries of this place, and I can't do anything *but* give my best."

*For we are all members of one another.*

These stories we hear in this place, stories of amazing generosity and sacrifice to provide abundant life for others, are very different from the stories at the beginning of this sermon. That is because we hear one particular Story every Sunday, told every time the Gospel is proclaimed from this pulpit and the Eucharist is celebrated at this altar.

*The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

Weekly we come forward to this altar rail and receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and we find ourselves mysteriously fed and sustained.

We are nourished and we are transformed into that same self-sacrificing Body. As we eat of the one Bread, we are knit into the Body of Christ for the world, strengthened as members of one another, and as members of Christ. Looking at the people beside us at the altar rail and those in the pews around us, seeing Christ reflected back to us in *their* compassion and generosity, we are inspired to imitate God ever more closely *ourselves*. We find ourselves more able to give ourselves up, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

While the past weeks have brought improving economic news, the next year will not be easy. Many will not be sure where their daily bread is coming from--some within this Cathedral family as well as those beyond. The state budget goes from bad to worse, requiring ever-greater cuts to crucial human services at the local level. More people will rely on agencies such as Episcopal Community Services, or the Alpha Project, or the mobile medical clinics, for their literal survival.

Despite diligent cost-cutting and generous giving, the Cathedral faces fixed expenses which always increase faster than any stewardship campaign can keep up. There are also limits to how much more we can ask our staff to sacrifice in order to keep our budget balanced.

There will be more stories of people asking, "Where are we to get bread to eat?" The sacrificial generosity this congregation already practices will need to continue and increase. Those among us whose material resources are diminished for a season will be trusting others to step forward in our place. There will be days when it will be tempting to say, "I look towards the future, and I am exhausted."

However, we know the future is not in our hands alone. When we are tempted to exhaustion, to give in to fear and scarcity, we shall not. We will look into the future with

the promises of Jesus echoing in our hearts. We will look around at the people to our left and our right and take strength from them, for we are members of one another, and together we are the Body of Christ.

And we will come forward to the altar rail and look up [point to the *Christus Rex*], to Jesus who is Lord of the present and the future.

He says to us, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

And we will make our offering and sacrifice.

AMEN.