

## From The Pastor

Once again, the Lord was faithful during my annual retreat. No two retreats are the same. Each year offers its own grace and surprise in ways that could not be expected. As much as we petition the Lord with our best wisdom and with the urgency of our needs, God nonetheless knows what we most need before we ask. In a longer period of prayer, like during a retreat, the wisdom and kindness of God becomes more clear and evident. Though there are inevitably days of puzzlement or dryness, God has always been gracious in revealing his love and truth. I returned on Tuesday to a full desk of mail and a dozen phone messages. However blest a retreat can be, the reality of coming home challenges the soul to remember that God remains present in the demands of daily life.

I was most edified and grateful for the generous parishioner who sent us a two-hundred dollar check for a tree to be planted. This, of course, was in response to my suggestion in this bulletin a couple weeks ago. Others have also asked about tree donations, or transplants. I am open to any reasonable suggestion that will help maintain the beauty of our property. Thank you to this first and generous donor.

Food in many ways is like the weather. It gets talked about a lot, and often enough complained about. The Israelites complained to Moses about the lack of food in the desert. In their hunger, the hard labor and slavery in Egypt looked pretty good compared to their present starvation. Though generally of poor quality, at least the people had their fleshpots of bread to fill their groaning stomachs. To a starving person any food can taste good. A starving person, however faith-filled, will sooner or later complain. Hunger does that to the best of us.

It is not likely the people were running on high reserves as they entered the desert. Made to work at hard labor with only modest nutrition at best, you can understand that they would quickly tire under the physical demands of a desert journey.

God hears their cry, allows for their complaining, responding with bread and meat. You cannot teach a starving person faith and compassion while they are still hungry. Once fed however, God intends to form a people who will recognize and honor his providential care and fidelity. Moses makes clear to the people that it was the Lord who provided the manna and the quail in response to their cry. God begins to form a people in faith.

People who work hard for their food or pay a lot to buy it appreciate a free lunch. This is the case in the gospel. Food tastes best when you are hungry, or when it's free. Any free lunch is worth another one. This is the thinking of those who pursue Jesus across the lake, and he tells them so. 'You are only looking for me because you ate the loaves and were filled.'

Jesus was gracious and happy to feed a hungry crowd. He is also deeply aware that we have hungers that go deeper than our stomachs. The bread is only an opening to the deeper nourishment of faith. 'Do not work for food that perishes, but for food that endures to eternal life.'

Where do we look for this food of the soul? How do we get in touch with our deeper hungers and find a worthy source of nourishment? People in the crowd before Jesus had the same questions. What can we do to accomplish the works of God? In other words, how do we find God's peace and come to a mature and enduring trust in Him?

'This is the work of God; believe in the One he has sent.' To believe in the One whom God has sent means we must move out of our stomachs and into our hearts. Stomach here represents our needs and desires as we perceive and create them; or as they are created and imposed on us by a consumerist culture that demands we take our identity from what we have and the food we eat. This is death to faith and will not lead us to know or believe in the One God has sent.

God has sent Jesus, the Word Made Flesh. Jesus makes it very clear: 'I am the bread of life; any who comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.' How is Jesus food and bread?

Jesus is the bread of compassion and the food of truth and love. Who of us is not hungry for this kind of food? Absolutely no one. We can satisfy ourselves with the goods of the world such that Jesus becomes one more comfort among many. This is very, very common. Jesus is one more place of comfort, usually attended to only after other things fail. This is not what Jesus intended when he gave himself to us as the Bread of Life.

What was intended was that we become bread for one another in the food of relationship, commitment, compassion, and self-giving. Physically hungry persons find deep strength through the bonds of love and connection with Jesus and others. They go forward in trust through the experience of mercy and the providence of God. Like the Israelites, those formed in the food of faith find the joy of community, and the promise of eternal life. Let us feed the poor in mind, body, and spirit, beginning with ourselves in Jesus.

Father John Esper