“God’s Creating Spirit: The Bread of Life”
Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 6:24-35
So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Last week, we heard the familiar story of the five barley loaves and two fish. Today we hear Jesus describe himself as the Bread of Life. Those images of bread for our bodies and bread for our souls give powerful depth and meaning to today’s sacrament of Holy Communion.

Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life and weaves and embodies this theme throughout all that he says and does. He demonstrated God’s bounty by feeding the crowds with two barley loaves, the bread of the poor, and five fish, so beautifully portrayed in John August Swanson’s serigraph in our Chapel. He tells us, in the Sermon on the Mount, to give food to anyone who asks. He preached that his followers were to be food for others.

Jesus said: I am the Bread of Life. Bread, of course, was at the center of the Mediterranean diet for rich and poor alike. The bread of the poor was most often made with barley; the bread of the rich made with the finest wheat. It was eaten at every meal. It was the most important food in the biblical period and for centuries to follow. No wonder, then that it is included in the central religious rituals of both Judaism and Christianity. Bread.

It’s all through the Biblical story. Remember the mysterious manna God provided the Israelites in the wilderness when their own supplies of bread had run out? Over and over again, food and bread are signs of God’s bountiful generosity. No wonder, then, that when God sends Jesus, he is born in Bethlehem, which means “the house of bread.”

Jesus said: I am the Bread of Life. Jesus enlists us in the kingdom work of addressing the food insecurity faced by far too many in our world. Food insecurity—ongoing uncertainty about where your next meal will come from.

And in addition to actual food for stomachs, Jesus meant by that food for hungry hearts. “I am the Bread of Life”, he says. “Come to me, and you shall not hunger. Come to me, and you shall not thirst.”

Do we not know spiritual food insecurity as well? Are not our hearts hungry for the food of the living God? Jesus said: I am the Bread of Life.

All kinds of things can cause the heart to be hungry. Physicians among us, even the heart specialists, have seen this sort of heart condition, seen it beyond the reported physical symptoms and complaints. A hungry heart comes from loss of a love, the rupture of a relationship, the loss of a job, depression, the betrayal of a friendship, the diagnosis of a serious illness, a parent’s failing health, the death of a friend, a child’s rebellion, a dream deferred, a world at war, the surging Delta variant of COVID—all kinds of things can cause our hearts to feel hungry for something more. We grow hungry for hope, hungry for love. And no matter what the condition of our life at the moment, we are always hungry for God, for the God we can know.

Jesus said: I am the Bread of Life. Christ is the incarnation of God’s gift of bread. He feeds our souls as well as our bodies. He “satisfies the hungry heart,” as our hymn put it, with life that goes beyond the grain of the wheat to the deepest longings of our hearts. And he gives us this sacrament so that we might know and remember him in the breaking and sharing of bread.
We join together in the sacrament this morning with great longing and expectation. We come with deep hungers in our hearts for meaning and purpose and clarity and peace. We ALL come with hungry hearts, knowing our need of grace.

One of the names for this sacrament of Holy Communion is “eucharist,” which means “thanksgiving” in Greek. We come saying “Thank you” for the gift of the Bread of Life. We come knowing that we are not perfect, yet God knows us, loves us, calls us by name, and yearns to heal us. We can but say “thank you.” We come to a table where there is bread enough for all, room enough for all, where there is a place for each and every one of us. And we say “thank you.”

We come to partake of this sacrament in the confidence that God’s creating Spirit can make us whole and strong, that bodies and hearts be strengthened for service. We come knowing that we will be fed, body and soul, and thus transformed to take part in the transformation of the world.

Fed by this bread, we can leave this time of worship healthier, stronger, clearer, more confident and more generous than when we came.

Feed us now, O God. Heal our hurting, hungry hearts, and use us to work your will in this world. Feed us with your life, fire us with your love, confront us with your justice, and make us one in the body of Christ. Amen.

Thanks be to God. AMEN