

**Sermon Preached August 2, 2015
Year B, Proper 13
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

So they ate and were well filled, * for he gave them what they craved [Psalm 78:29].

Amen.

It was two years ago, May and June of 2013, that I walked the 500 miles of the Camino de Santiago. This medieval pilgrimage begins in the small French village of St. Jean Pied de Port, ascends over the Pyrenees Mountains, continues across Northern Spain, and ends at the Cathedral of Santiago. The very first morning I set out, alone, walking along a sunny trail through the fields with a 20lbs pack on my back, I had walked no more than perhaps half an hour when I heard the sounds of someone whistling in the distance. (*whistle "Guide me O Thou great Jehovah"*). Being the good Episcopalian that I am I thought to myself, "I know that tune!" Then I started to run the words through my mind. The first verse is "Guide me, O though great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land: I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with thy powerful hand; bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore, feed me now and evermore." And I thought to myself, "It's a song about pilgrims!" As a fledgling pilgrim I was tickled by this little dose of Anglican holiness on the first steps of my pilgrimage. I heard it as a good sign.

The hymn is about the Israelites fleeing from slavery in Egypt. How they were freed by God and followed Moses into the wilderness. It's the story we hear today in our Old Testament lesson. The one where they are fed manna in the wilderness, the bread of heaven, to relieve their

hunger. At the same time, the hymn is also an allusion to the New Testament bread which Jesus gives to us in the Eucharist. We are fed by his very flesh. Jesus speaks of this in the gospel when he explains to his disciples, “It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven... I am the bread of life.”

Now that first morning of the Camino began as a lovely day – sunshine and picturesque paths. This was no wilderness! I had a good breakfast, and after a few hours stopped for a delicious cappuccino at the border between France and Spain. The hymn did not apply to me. I was not weak, nor was the land barren. I was a happy well-fed pilgrim in lush country. Granted, I was new to walking all day with a pack, but I was confident in my abilities to succeed. A few more hours went by and I had a small lunch. I was hot, so was in short sleeves. Then I began to get tired and decided I wasn't all that thirsty so I emptied most of my water bottle to make my pack lighter, and continued happily on my way.

Then the weather changed. Clouds rolled in. The terrain became markedly steeper, as the climb up the Pyrenees Mountains began in earnest. Civilization ended and there were no more villages. The temperature dropped, dramatically. At first I enjoyed the cool air and light rain. I was glad to get wet, although the climb was proving difficult. I was tired and the pack was heavy. Then the rain got heavier and the temperature dropped further. I became chilled so put on my jacket & poncho, but at this point I was soaking wet. The climb got very steep. Pretty soon I was shivering and exhausted. The trail seemed to be at a 90 degree angle. My legs were like spaghetti. I was hungry. The rain was coming down in buckets. The temperature had plummeted to the 30s. It was then I realized I had a raging thirst, but of course, no water. There were also no

other pilgrims on the trail. I tried looking up and catching water from the sky in my mouth or off dribbling leaves, but it didn't really work. I trudged on. Finally, I collapsed on a log to rest. I kept my heavy pack on my back to avoid setting it into the mud. I sat with my chin cupped in my hands, elbows on knees, rain pouring down, soaking to the skin, cold, hungry, thirsty, and thought to myself regarding the pilgrimage, "what the heck was I thinking?! What an idiotic idea! Why did I voluntarily choose to walk the Camino?! I am miserable and alone and in a strange country." I cried, said a prayer, closed my eyes, and fell asleep sitting upright. "Guide me, O though great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land: I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with thy powerful hand."

Let us leave me on the wet mountainside for a moment and reflect a bit on Jesus' commentary about bread. In the gospel of John he offers a long teaching on what he calls the "bread of heaven." We will be hearing portions of this teaching over the next few Sundays. Last week Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish to feed the hungry. Today crowds of people are following Jesus; hunting him down. When they finally find him he comments, that they are only following him because they had a physical hunger for which he gave them bread and fish. Jesus, however, counsels, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." Jesus seems to be saying that there is some other kind of hunger which they must possess that seeks to do more than nourish the body. A hunger to nourish the soul, which this bread of heaven will satisfy. He is speaking about the sacrament of the Eucharist, when we consume his flesh and blood. But why would God, who is spiritual, reveal himself in something so physical, like bread? How can a spiritual hunger be alleviated by tangible, physical, matter?

We are beings who contain both physical and spiritual dimensions, but we can get preoccupied with one or the other and fail to remember that, in Christ, the two are intertwined. The Eucharist reminds us of this reality. In the words of mystic and theologian Richard Rohr, “I believe that the primary healing of human loneliness and meaninglessness is full contact with full reality itself, especially in its concrete forms . . . What human existence often prefers is highly contrived ways of avoiding the real, the concrete, the physical. We fabricate artificial realities instead, . . . So Jesus brought all of our fancy thinking down to earth, to one concrete place of incarnation—this bread and this cup of wine!”¹

Back on the mountainside, I woke up after about a five-minute nap, stood up and continued my self-enforced march. Every 20 feet or so I would need to stop and rest. The trail was steep and seemed endless. At this point I had been on the Camino for 9 hours. I was exhausted, hungry, thirsty, cold, and wet. When suddenly God answered my prayers in the form of a group of Italians! The rain had let up and I chanced upon three Italian pilgrims huddled under a tree consuming a small picnic. They spoke not a word of English and I not a word of Italian, but they invited me to join their meal. They didn’t have much to share between them, much less with one foolishly-underprepared American, but they offered what they had. The bread, cheese, apple slices, sips of water, and two squares of chocolate were heaven! I don’t remember the last time I enjoyed a meal more! We gestured with each other and laughed and ate. I felt much revived.

Rohr writes, “If God became flesh and entered this world in Jesus, then the hiding place of God is this world, in the material, in the animals, in the elements, in the physical. These are

¹ <http://christouraxiom.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Eucharist-Meditations-by-Richard-Rohr.pdf>, 7/31/15

the hiding places--and the revelation places--of God!”² That afternoon I knew God’s love for, and guidance of, me not because I had a mystical experience, but because She fed me with bread, and water, and chocolate, and good people who made me feel happy. Like the multiplication of loaves, and manna in the wilderness, God was revealed to me in the physical.

I continued my pilgrimage and after another 20 minutes reached the top of the mountain! I was ecstatic and the spring in my step increased. Within another half hour I arrived at my destination – the Monastery of Roncesvalles. After finding a bunk, showering, changing clothes, and having a snack, I joined many other pilgrims for a Mass at the monastery for those who had completed this first, particularly arduous day of the Camino. The Mass was conducted entirely in Spanish, but it was soothing and heartening to be in church. After the bread and wine were consecrated, I heard the priest say all were welcome to receive. God is mystery, and mystery is beyond words. Not that words aren’t helpful, but they only go so far. In the end, that which is transcendent cannot be described, only experienced. Like eating bread and drinking wine.

Through the Eucharist we encounter the risen Christ, the bread of heaven. Then our eyes are opened so that what is true at the altar, we realize, is true for all physical creation. Eucharist is practice for recognizing God hiding in physical matter, both in and outside the church. The hunger we have for God at the table, expands to become hunger for God in all that we are and do. Even during a picnic with Italian pilgrims. Then we begin to see that the whole of life is sacramental. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, “By means of all created things without exception the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us. We imagined it as distant and

² <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--The-Hiding-Place-Is-Also-the-Revelation-Place-of-God.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=5vzsc01bb7c>, 8/1/15

inaccessible, when in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.”³ So when I came forward to receive Eucharist at the monastery, it was actually my second sacramental meal of the day.

“Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me now and ever more. Feed me now and ever more.”

Amen.

³ Teilhard de Chardin's The Divine Milieu, http://www.art-quotes.com/auth_search.php?authid=1224#.Vb1c9vIRLdQ, 8/1/15.