

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 9 AUGUST 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

John 6: 35, 41-51

“Baptism as Exodus from Captured Lives”

1. God, an object of our desire or the blessings of more life

The story of Scrat, the saber-toothed squirrel in Ice Age 3, which we heard in our story of young people, reminds us that any object, person, or being can be reduced to an object created to satisfy our unconscious desires or drives.

An ordinary acorn used as food can sustain and feed community and friendship.

Instead, by the imagination, in our story an acorn was transferred into a love-object, a form of jewel, creating competition and destroying community.

The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud observed that religious faith could reduce God or religion to “the longing for the father, for the blessings of paternal authorisation” (Eric L Santner, *On the PsychoTheology of Everyday life*, 25). This was an expression of the neediness of the unconscious. In turn, this reduced the human subject to a total dependency on all forms of institutions. And by institutions, Santner goes on to say, “I mean all sites that endow us with social recognition and intelligibility, that produce and regulate symbolic identities” (26).

Harold Bloom suggests that Freud had not really understood the Jewish conception of God. Bloom rightly says, “Yahweh is a creator, a revealer, and a redeemer, whose attributes yield us the blessings of more life, rather than those that ensue from the foundation and augmentation of institutions” (“Freud and Beyond,” *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present*, 160; cited in Santner, 26)

A story in 1 Kings 19, set for the lectionary readings for today, illustrates the way God seeks to create “the blessings of more life”. Elijah, exhausted and despairing at the political leadership and his powerlessness to address institutional corruption, retreats to the wilderness at Mt Sinai. He asks that he might die, so great is his grief. Yet, a messenger from God comes and feeds him.

The food sustained him for 40 days and 40 nights – a sacred number for wandering in the shadowland between life and death, between justice and injustice, between doubt and certainty, between call and response.

Sea Raven, Bread of Life II: Angel Food? Proper 14, Year B

<http://www.gaiarising.org/2009/08/bread-of-life-ii-angel-food-proper-14.html>

2. Jesus is the bread of life that nourishes more life

In our reading from John 6 this morning, we find another example of the human desire to control and reduce Jesus’ teaching. Jesus responds to their scepticism and cynicism about Jesus – they know his mother and father, brothers and sisters, he is one of us, so how can he know such mysteries! - by

claiming that he is the bread of life because life-giving is about nurturing and giving its own life for the life of others. Eternal life here means a quality of life. As William Loader writes:

For eternal life is John's favourite way of describing salvation and it means sharing in God's life, for its benefits both for oneself and for others.
<http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost10.htm>)

It is Jesus presence, writes Raymond Brown (*The Gospel of John*, 269), that nourishes people. He goes on to say, "Jesus identifies himself with the bread from God, which nourishes people on their journey in the wilderness". Some commentators have noted that this presence of Jesus and nourishment equates Jesus with Wisdom in the book of Proverbs. And, as Sirach 15:3 writes,

"She [Wisdom] will nourish one with bread of understanding and give them the water of learning to drink".

My suggestion, to deepen this, is that Jesus is wisdom that nurtures us to be wise, that is, to learn to expose and uncover the way we create objects to be obsessed about and that keep us from human community and generosity. And that this means, as I said last week, creating a spirituality of generosity, relationship and mutuality.

3. Baptism as an exodus from captured lives into new identity and belonging

The baptism of Jesus is another event in which the presence of Jesus nourishes each of us as human beings. It is a story in which Jesus as a human being experiences a profound exodus from society into a new identity and belonging. In the various symbolic forms in the story, in the mysterious intersection of heaven and earth, in the voice of God as loving parent unconditionally affirming and valuing, Jesus is drawn to God and sent back to give his life for humanity. So we too, in our acts of baptism, undergo an unfathomable exodus from the way our lives may have been captured and contained by ourselves or by our institutions. We are drawn to eternal life, we are called loved children of a gracious and ever-loving God, we are resented into life as a new person.

As Jean-Luis Chretien writes,

"Spirit becomes mine only when something in me shatters and loses itself in gift." (The Call and the Response, p. 44) All pretenses that "I'm on my own," or "I don't owe anything to anyone" shatter like cheap glass ...

It may come as light as the "touch on an angel," as it did with Elijah, but it will feed/sustain us for the rest of our life.

Michael Scanlon wrote,

"One of [St.] Augustine's words for the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, is God's gift, the *donum Dei*. Augustine puts it very nicely, 'God gives us many gifts, but *Deus est qui Deum dat*' (God is He who gives God')." (God the Gift and Postmodernism, 54)

What runs throughout the biblical narratives is that God operates and is motivated in and through generosity, always desiring to enhance blessings of more life, in which we and the whole world, regardless of what faith or religion, are invited to participate to create communities of generosity.