

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
PENTECOST 10 (P14B), AUGUST 9, 2009
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"The Bread of Life"

"The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." [John 6:51 NRSV]

Church growth is very popular these days. All you have to do is take a look at our recent parish survey and you will see that it is very important here at Christ Church, also. In fact we have just formed a Parish Growth committee and I am pleased to announce that Fred Hardee will be the chairperson! Their task will be to develop a new member ministry. I am excited about this and hope that Fred will have no trouble finding other committee members.

On the other side of that coin, if you want to know how to "shrink" the size of a church, begin by reading the sixth chapter of John's gospel. It begins with the feeding of the five thousand and then traces the response of the people to that miracle. It says that "(The people) were about to come and take (Jesus) by force to make him king." Jesus cools off their enthusiasm with some hard to digest teaching. The text says further: "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." The chapter ends with Simon Peter's famous rhetorical question: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

In our study of the Book of Acts in the Adult Forum we've heard how the early church grew from a handful to many thousand in a very short time. Here at Christ Church we have not done quite that well, but we have grown to over 100 members in just eleven years. That's not bad in a county where you are, generally speaking, some form of Baptist or nothing at all! But in John's gospel just the opposite happens. Jesus takes over five thousand and reduces them to a mere handful! What in the world could he have been thinking?

We will take three Sundays to look at this account in some detail, focusing on the metaphor of bread. It was bread that Jesus multiplied in the feeding of the five thousand. It was bread that God gave the Israelites in the wilderness, or a bread substitute called manna. When the people asked Jesus for eternal bread, he answered, "I am the Bread of Life."

The key verse in today's reading is the final verse: "...the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." It was this verse that people didn't understand. Or if they did it started them to questioning his teaching. Perhaps it reminded them of the days of human sacrifice? What in the world could it mean?

In the story about Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night, we may have an answer. To Nicodemus, he said it in a more familiar way. It is the famous passage found in John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

The problem with this simple explanation is in the reactions of those who hear it. Some hear and are glad. Some hear and are insulted or indifferent. Some hear and despair. In the coming weeks will look at these reactions. Today let's focus on those who despair, thereby "shrinking" the church.

People who hear the words of Jesus and despair are those who believe they are beyond redemption, or, as we discussed last Sunday in the Forum,

those who believe they are not or don't need to be saved. This attitude usually stems from a sense of hopelessness, that God can do nothing to help them. Often they take it to the extreme, thinking that what they have done is too terrible for God to forgive. In other words, they have invented a God weaker than themselves, which may be the greater sin, because they take pride in their own badness! They think that their badness is greater than God's goodness.

Thank God I have not met any of these people here at Christ Church, and I have wondered why that is. Perhaps it is because, even though we come from varied church backgrounds, we really do have an understanding of what it means to be fed by Jesus, and by each other. Our survey indicates this when it reveals that our people just love to come to church! Statistics show that our attendance over the same period last year has increased by 7%, even though our membership growth has been limited. So if there are any among us who despair, perhaps all we need to do is to encourage them to attend church!

But before we go too far into a "Pollyanna perspective", we also need to take a quick look at why Jesus called the five thousand to account. If the church is all about growth, why did Jesus suddenly turn so negative?

One might suspect that growth for the sake of growth was not what Jesus had in mind. Instead, quality control may have been his bottom line. By saying that the bread he gives is also his flesh, he was indicating a meal so powerful in content that people could actually turn their lives around simple by partaking of it.

Think about it. What if you met a person who was in a really desperate situation? What if you said to them, "I think what you need is the body of Christ? Why don't you come with me on Sunday morning?" You will at the same time be inviting them to partake of the bread at the altar and to join with a group of people who see themselves as part of the body of Christ. What a wonderful way to "grow" the church!

In other words, "shrinkage" is not in our future. If you want to help make sure of that, come to the "Holy Conversation" on Thursday night and share your thoughts about the results of the survey, and about the future of Christ Church.

And if you *really* want to help, give your name to Fred Hardee and tell him you want to be a part of a new member ministry!