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First and St. Stephens UCC
Towson, MD
August 2, 2009
Pentecost 9B

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
Psalm 78:23-29
Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

Roadfood

Perhaps we should be distributing napkins along with the bulletins this morning. Napkins would be appropriate because both the scripture lessons have to do with food.

Exodus tells us the story of the Children of Israel kvetching in the wilderness about being hungry and having manna rained on them. That story forms the background for the other story, John's account of Jesus talking with people who had pursued him all the way across the Sea of Galilee to find out how he did that thing with the loaves and fishes. People on the move, needing to be fed, and worrying about how that's going to happen.

Of course, any time you're on the move, getting nourishing, soul-satisfying food can be a problem. If you're backpacking, say, it's not as if any time you get hungry, you can just go to the kitchen and make yourself a fluffernutter. A long car trip with children can become an ordeal if you hear from the back seat that plaintive, "Mom/Dad, I'm hungry."

Do you suppose Moses and Aaron considered the catering angle before they left Egypt with all those people? Freedom is a fine thing, to be sure, but people get hungry at regular intervals, and growling bellies are enough to make even former slaves forget all about freedom. Out there in the desert, the people accuse Moses of bringing them out of the security of bondage in Egypt only to kill them with hunger.

Even after they are fed with manna from heaven, the whining doesn't stop: "Why did you have to bring us out here into this desert to starve us to death and kill our children and our livestock? We wanna' go back to Egypt. Yeah, we were slaves, but at least we had food in our bellies." In spite of their ungrateful complaints, the story says that a provident God sends them quail to satisfy their yearning for meat. The Psalmist sums it up:

And they ate and were well filled,
for God gave them what they craved. (Ps. 78:29)

This story of grumbling in the wilderness, of human ingratitude and divine providence, tells us that there are two kinds of hunger: the body kind and the soul kind. And in the end of this story, both kinds of hunger are satisfied.

Of course, we don't look for manna when it comes to feeding ourselves and our families when we're moving around. In our travels around the country, Philip and I have learned to seek out what we call "roadfood." *Roadfood* is the title of a book by food writers Jane and Michael Stern that inspired our quest for food more soul-satisfying than what's on offer at the fast-food franchises at the nearest Interstate exit. From the Sterns' example we have learned to seek out the diners, barbecue joints, and local haunts that have good basic regional chow wherever we happen to be.

To find Roadfood--good barbecue in North Carolina, say, or great crab cakes on the Eastern Shore--local advice is important. Once in Live Oak, Florida I asked a clerk in a convenience store where *he* would eat. He directed us to a little cinder block building that had no sign outside, but inside was dishing up delectable home cooking, including sweet potato pie fit for the angels. Certain visual signals are clues to likely Roadfood joints. A lot of pickup trucks in the parking lot is a promising sign. When you go inside a café or diner, look for calendars on the wall; the more calendars, the more authentic the establishment. One calendar is pretty good. Four is excellent. A display of trophies for local bowling or softball teams is also a good sign.

Seeking out Roadfood is an extra effort, but it's fun and it's worth it, because really good food keeps us going on our travels.

All of us sometimes forget that our spirits need to be fed just as much as our bellies do. We have to be proactive to find the nourishment our souls crave. We seek out places that can feed us with acceptance and fellowship, with stories and teaching, with beauty and inspiration, with the symbolic food of the Eucharist. Finding a church that feeds your soul is kind of like finding that special Roadfood diner. You like the food, the folk get to know you, and you get to feel comfortable with the way things are. It gets to feel like home.

A pastor I know has breakfast with the two principal lay leaders of the congregation every Tuesday morning at a local diner. They have a regular waitress, Bev. When Bev sees them coming, even before they sit down, she pours Jeff's tea, Bob's coffee, and Sue's Diet Coke. She knows that Bob always wants the French toast and the others want eggs one way or another. But the other day they came in and learned that Bev has had to go away for a while, so Sally is filling in for her. Now Sally doesn't know these folks. She's good at her job, so she's trying hard to remember their names and get their special likes down. But Sally's not Bev and she won't know everything. She's bound to do things differently.

This morning, I feel sort of like Sally probably feels. You've arrived here from your travels through life to get your spiritual comfort food, and the First and St. Stephen's Café is open for business, but it's different somehow. Bruce and Clara aren't here to welcome you. I'm not them. I don't know all the little nuances of worship in your place. And even if I did, I would still be me, a different person who does things in a particular way.

Back before I had children I once agreed to stay with the three young children of friends who were going away for the weekend. I quickly discovered that even the simplest need was more complicated than it looked. One of the children asked me to put jelly on her toast. I slathered on a generous layer of grape jelly and handed it back to her. She examined it, scrunched up her nose, and looked crestfallen. "What's wrong?" I asked. She said, "I don't like the lumps."

Sometimes we want "it" done just the way Mom always did it. Wanting the jelly spread just right suggests that physical hunger and spiritual craving overlap sometimes. I suspect that as we get to know one another, the lumps in the jelly may not matter quite so much. But we can agree on this: what really matters is the bread underneath. The important thing is to get the nourishment. The biscuits Sally brings out of the kitchen at the diner are just as delectable, just as nourishing, as the ones Bev brought. And the Bread of Life offered to us here in word and sacrament doesn't change, either.

When the people who had been fed by Jesus chased after him, they first wanted to make him king, then, when that failed, they said, "At least tell us how you do that thing with the bread and fish. We want to be able to do that, too." So Jesus responds by feeding them again—he feeds them some truth. He reminds them that their lives are more than any hunger or fear or ambition or hurt they feel right now. They are part of a much larger story, a story that extends all the way back to frightened, hungry people crossing a trackless wilderness, and includes a loving Provider who fed bodies and spirits. *Don't forget that*, he says. *Don't forget that you are spirit as well as body and that the Eternal One feeds you in both those ways.*

And that story, that awareness, is what nourishes us in our journey. At the center of our faith is a table. We bring our hungers and gather around it to be fed by our story. From it we draw strength and courage and are nourished in the capacity to love.

The parish administrator of our church in Syracuse had a little boy named Paul. Paul was a real pistol. He had a hard time sitting still or doing what was asked of him. When Paul was visiting his grandparents, they took him to their church, which was Catholic. When it came time for communion, Grandma brought Paul up to the rail with her, and before she could stop him, Paul reached out and took the bread the priest offered. His grandmother was horrified because Paul hadn't been properly catechized or confirmed. He wasn't even being raised as a Catholic—his parents were UCC! She sat Paul down and asked him if he understood what communion was about. He said, "Uh-huh. I eat a little piece of bread that's like taking Jesus inside me, and he helps me be a good boy."

Paul got it. He understood the Eucharist as well as many theologians do. This morning we gather at the table to take into ourselves the nourishing bread of our story, the story of a journey through time and space and eternity with a God who loves us, forgives us, and feeds us with what we truly need.