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I am the bread of life

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Aug. 5, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

The disciples did not automatically come to full awareness of the true identity of Jesus and the purpose of his mission. Through the Christian Scriptures, contemporary believers can trace their ever-deepening appreciation of who Jesus was. In Mark?s Gospel, for example, the true identity of the Son of Man and Son of God is withheld until a Roman soldier proclaims the dying Jesus to be that holy one. A couple of decades later, when the Gospels of Matthew and Luke achieved their final form, the early believers clearly understood that Jesus was Lord and Christ from the moment of his conception; the infancy narratives attest to this development in Christian faith. By the time the fourth canonical Gospel was completed (circa 90-100), there was no doubt that Jesus was God, the very Word of God made flesh -- an insight given voice in the Johannine prologue.

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Ephesians 4:17, 20-24

John 6:24-35

All through the Johannine Gospel, it is evident that the early Christian community had by then grown to recognize Jesus as the living and breathing presence of God in their midst. Repeatedly, the Johannine Jesus acts and speaks in a manner that emphasizes his divinity.

In today?s first reading, the authors of Exodus recall God?s gift of sustenance in the wilderness. Despite their grumbling and their recalcitrance, God feeds the weary escapees from Egypt with manna and quail. Affirming God?s power and presence with them, Moses proclaims, ?This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.? In the ensuing centuries, the Hebrew faithful would look back in fondness at those years in the desert when, despite their complaints, the Lord loved them and saw to their every need.

In the fourth Gospel, the Johannine Jesus reprises the gift of bread (see July 29 Gospel) and then explains, in detail, the significance of his action (Aug. 5, 12, 19, 26), all the while challenging those who ate their fill to believe in him as the bread of life. Jesus? ?I am the bread of life? is one of many such ?I am? statements in the fourth Gospel. Each associates Jesus with the God who was similarly revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:14).

Just as many were attracted to Jesus in the synoptic Gospels because of the wonders he worked, so many in the Johannine community refused to look beyond the sign of the bread to the one who gave it. This fascination with signs and wonders precluded their full appreciation of what Jesus was revealing to them. No longer would they be fed by manna and quail or even by the plentiful barley loaves and fish. Rather, Jesus was offering, as food, the gift of himself, his teaching, his very body and blood given up in sacrifice for sin. Through the ages, faith in

Jesus? unique gift of himself continues to challenge believers.

To describe this ongoing challenge, the fourth evangelist drew upon a favorite technique of his: highlighting the deep irony that lies at the heart of the human experience. As Thomas R. Steagold has pointed out, many came seeking Jesus, but they didn?t want to follow him (*The Abingdon Preaching Annual*, Abingdon Press: 1999). They called him ?Rabbi,? but they refused to be taught. They clamored after bread, but they did not want to be nourished as Jesus intended. They were willing to work for food that would perish, but Jesus challenged them to channel their efforts and their hungers toward food that gives eternal life.

Today, the challenges of the Johannine Jesus still stand. So does the invitation to be taught, to be fed and to be one with him, the bread of life. Another challenge for us is the stark reality of hunger in our world. We are privileged to eat, to drink, to learn God?s loving words -- and because of this privilege, we should be sensitized to the needs of others. We are to leave this holy table enlightened by the doctrine, graced by the experience and willing to alleviate the hungers of those whom God will place in our path. At the meals Jesus hosted, there were no guest lists or place cards. None were necessary, because all were invited. In our sharing of the bread of life, we pray to follow his lead in welcoming all others to his table and our own.

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