

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for Sunday, July 31, 2011
The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost ~ Proper 13
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

In the account of the creation of human beings recorded in the second chapter of Genesis, we read, “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and the man became a living being.” The Hebrew word translated “living being” is *nephesh*. And the man became a nephesh. Our first ancestors were described as nepheshes. That’s what we are too because we are their descendants. What is a nephesh?

Let me answer this way. The other day while at a friend’s home, I looked out the window and saw a nest in a magnolia tree. In the nest, three nepheshes were visible. Three wide-open mouths hungry and waiting for the food their parents would bring. That is perhaps the best way to describe what it means to be a nephesh. It is to be like the uplifted, open mouth of a baby bird, wanting and waiting to be fed.

The next day, the accuracy of the description was driven home a little further when I read the following words on a special tag hanging on the front bumper of an automobile: “Hi! I’m June. Feed me.” And, just this morning at 7:20 on the way to the church, I saw a man standing on the corner with a cardboard sign on which he had written, “I’m hungry. Please feed me.”

We are indeed nepheshes, beings who want to be fed. The Holy Scriptures are replete with references to the hunger of humanity and with the proclamation that our Creator has made provision for our hungers to be satisfied. It has been and is a reliable observation that when human beings are starving, it is usually because of disobedience, either on the part of the individual or on the part of humanity.

Perhaps you are thinking, “How can you say that when you know perfectly well that there are millions of starving innocent children all over the world? How have they disobeyed?” My answer is, the Creator has charged humanity with managing the boundless resources of the earth in such a way as to make sure there is no one who starves. We and our other overweight brothers and sisters around the globe are the ones who have disobeyed. The food is there, we just don’t share it.

The truth remains, God provides for his children! When there is disobedience, when humanity feeds not only on the produce of the earth but also upon the spiritual food the Creator gives to complement it, the hungry are filled with good things.

Our ancestors in Egypt hungered for freedom. God delivered them with a mighty hand and gave a meal to remind each succeeding generation.

Our ancestors in the wilderness grew proud and disobedient. They forgot all the Lord had done for them. They said, “Can God supply food in the desert?” God’s answer was to rain down bread from heaven.

Our ancestors sitting at the feet of Jesus by the Sea of Galilee grew hungry. The disciples wanted to send them away at that point. But Jesus insisted, “You give them something to eat.” As he had been nourishing their souls, so he would nourish their bodies by the marvelous multiplication of loaves and fishes.

In the Upper Room, Jesus tied the heavenly and earthly food together in the ultimate way when he gave us a meal as a way to remember him. St. Paul gave his account of the Last Supper to the Church in Corinth and reminded them that if members of the body went away from the Eucharist hungry, it was because some were not sharing what God had provided to be shared. There were those who were so concerned with the crumbs that they forgot the loaf. And our Lord spoke of that time when there would be a heavenly banquet to celebrate the completion of all creation and the ultimate victor of God and God’s people.

And what about us, the nepheshes who gather around this table today? Will our hungers be satisfied? Will there be those who go away hungry today? Will there be those who are so greedy that they forget that God fills us with good things in order to equip us to become a sacrament of love divine for a hungry world? Will we for whom God makes love divine tangible under the signs of bread and wine make that same love tangible for others whose eyes say in so many words, “Hi! I’m June. Feed me”?

Sacraments are not things that exist by themselves. They are actions – actions of Christ and actions of those who celebrate with him. Jesus makes sacraments happen and the celebrating community makes sacraments happen at one and the same time. The sacraments are a joint enterprise between God and God’s people. Feeding and being fed are actions. It involves doing. It involves the giving and the receiving of what is tangible in response to the giving and receiving of that which is not tangible.

Heavenly bread is united with earthly bread by the power of the Holy Spirit in order for hungry people to be fully satisfied. In the sharing of this bread, obediently giving and receiving, joyfully celebrating the good news of God’s unbreakable promise that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, it is our faith and conviction that the hungers of humanity can and shall be satisfied.

We come here mindful of Jesus’ command, “Do this in remembrance of me.” And today we are also mindful of his command, “You give them something to eat.”

What we receive in faith, we are bound to give in faith, so that one day all of live may become a sign of the love of God expressed in our brother Jesus Christ. As we are united to him in this holy meal, we are pressed into one loaf and become bread that will in turn be broken for humanity. We are fed so that we can feed others. We cannot be about the mission of God unless we feed upon that which God alone gives us. We cannot give what we have not already received.

If you have come here today with the physical and spiritual hungers of your life needing to be satisfied, God’s response to your hunger is this tangible sign, in itself a promise, guaranteed by the life, death, and resurrection of the One who said, “Whoever eats of the bread that I shall give will never go hungry, for I am the Bread of Life.”