

**Proper 15 B
John 6:51-58
August 16, 2009**

A few weeks ago, when we were in the UP on vacation, I had a fight with my daughter. There's no need to go into details ... every family has its moments of dissent and disruption. Our family is no different. And so Katie and I went at it. Hard words were spoken. Feelings were hurt. Tears were shed. In the end, she drove off, saying she just had to be alone, by herself, to sort things out.

In her absence, Wendell and I wondered, what now? We had planned a family dinner. I was going to cook one of Katie's favorite meals ... shrimp risotto. But what was the point? I certainly wasn't hungry. My stomach was in knots. I didn't feel like making a big meal. We finally decided just to build a campfire and roast some hot dogs and try to make the best of a day gone sour.

And just as Wendell started to gather up wood for the fire, my cell phone dinged. It was a text from Katie. "I'm sorry for everything," it said. "I'm better now. Shrimp risotto for dinner?"

What then? My feelings were still raw. I could have just re-engaged the battle. I could have said things like "sorry isn't good enough." I could have said, "Well, you missed your chance. We're grilling hot dogs." I could have withheld my forgiveness until she measured up to my own standard of repentance, until she jumped through enough hoops that maybe, maybe I could say, "Well, OK then. I forgive you."

But I didn't. I didn't want to fight anymore. I didn't want to go over and over that same old sorry ground again.

I texted back. "I love you. Come home. I'm starting to cook right now." And I started sautéing the onion and the garlic. It was when I poured the rice into the hot fragrant oil and began to stir, as I watched the grains begin to plump and glisten, that I realized much more was being made than shrimp risotto.

This was a meal of reconciliation and restoration. This was a meal that said, “come home, I love you,” a meal that gathered the family around the table, a meal that could put all those bad feelings and bitter words aside so that we could eat and drink and laugh and love each other, as families are made to do.

It was more than just dinner.

For weeks now, our gospel readings have slowly worked us through the sixth chapter of John’s gospel, as Jesus shares bread, speaks about bread, teaches about bread, and finally, alienates large numbers of people over bread, as we will hear in next week’s lesson. It began with the feeding of 5,000 people by the lakeshore. Five thousand people, men, women, children fed with five barley loaves and two fish, fed till they were full to bursting, and with leftovers to boot.

Five thousand random people. No one checked their credentials. No one vetted their worthiness. Whoever was there was fed. Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave, and gave, and gave, and gave. Indiscriminately. Abundantly.

Then he went back across the sea to Capernaum, to the synagogue, and all those people followed. People who had been hungry, but now were full. People who had been left out, but now were included. People who had been broken, but who were now made whole. They came seeking bread, and that’s when Jesus told them what they really hungered for ... not just bread for the belly, but bread for the heart and bread for the soul. Living bread. Bread from heaven. Bread of Life.

And he started talking about God’s indiscriminate love for the world, an indiscriminate love that was made very flesh in Jesus himself. He told them, “Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.” He told them they could come to him, and feed off him, and find themselves beloved, find themselves alive, find themselves at home in God’s own heart.

Well, then the complaining began. It was too strange, what Jesus was saying. It was offensive, to talk about eating human flesh. It was against Jewish law, even to think about drinking blood.

It was nonsense to think that this man, this human man, was food from heaven, that he was the living embodiment of a God who would welcome anyone who came to him. Anyone. Sinners. Prostitutes. Tax collectors. Gentiles. Women. Children. Slaves. Law breakers and law abiders. He called himself bread for the world. Bread for anybody.

It was the very bread of his death that Jesus was talking about. The death of a man taken, blessed, broken and given for the sake of the whole world. Not just for one corner of the world. Not just for one group of people in the world. Not just for the worthies of the world, the good folks, the decent folks, the upstanding folks. But for the whole world, the broken, battered, outcast and alienated world, the divided and dissenting world, and for all of the murdering, hateful, hurting, warring humanity that surged across its surface. This is the death that sets it all to rights. This is the death that is God's own message to us – to each of us, to all of us -- "I love you. Come home. We'll have dinner."

This radical acceptance, this extravagant forgiveness, this no-grudges-allowed kind of reconciliation is what Jesus is doing with us and for us and through us, today and every single time we gather at this table.

In his death, Jesus made it all right for us to come home. Jesus made peace between us and the God whom we ignore, betray, deny and even despise from time to time. Jesus made it safe for us to love one another, to set aside whatever burning rage or petty irritation is binding up our hearts this morning. Jesus became the bread that makes us a family once again, gathered here to eat and drink and laugh and love one another, as families were made to do.

This teaching is difficult. Glorious, but difficult. Glorious because it is such good news for each of us who know ourselves to be wandering, lost, rejected and far from God. Difficult because it requires us to see that it's not just for us ... but for everyone, because all of us are wandering, lost, rejected and far from God. We don't get to say who comes to table with us. It is God's table, not ours. We don't get to determine who is sorry enough, or who has been punished enough, or who is holy enough to come and eat. It is God who calls us to the feast, it is Christ's own radical act of forgiveness that we feed upon in this bread.

There was a movie, some time ago, called “Places in the Heart.” If you remember it, it’s probably because of Sally Field’s famous acceptance speech when she won an Oscar as best actress for this film, when she said “You like me. You really like me.”

What gets forgotten, I think, is the very message of that film. Set in the rural south in the midst of the Great Depression, it is about a widow, played by Sally Field. She was widowed when her husband, a sheriff, was shot by a young black boy. The boy was later lynched by the local Klan. The widow takes in a black field hand and a blind, bitter white man, and together with her children, they get the cotton crop in on time so they can keep the farm and survive. But the field hand is threatened by the Klan and has to leave town, and once again at the end of the movie, the widow’s life and family is divided.

But the very last scene of the movie is set in church. The tiny choir is singing “In the Garden.” And communion is passed on trays, as it is in more Protestant churches, in little cups of grape juice with little bits of wafer. As the trays go from hand to hand down the pews, we see the people of the town ... the members of the Klan, the brother-in-law who cheated on his wife, and look, he’s sitting next to his wife, then the widow, and her children, and the blind man, and then the field hand, and then her dead husband, and last, the boy who killed him.

And the bread and wine go from hand to hand to hand to hand, from the living to the dead, from the exiled to the included, from the murdered to their murderers. “The peace of the Lord be with you” they say as they pass the trays along. “The peace of the Lord be with you.”

This is the feast we share today. The table is ready and all are invited. Invited to feast upon Christ himself, the very bread from heaven, the bread -- not of old hatreds and bitter death, but the bread of new creation, the bread of eternal life.

“I love you,” God says. “Come home. Let’s eat.”