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St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
13th Sunday after Pentecost/Year B/Proper 15
August 19, 2018
Text: John 6:51-58

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Today's Gospel put me in remembrance of the book and subsequent movie, *Les Miserable*. In the opening scene of the movie we see men performing heavy labor. Among them is the man, Jean Valjean, who has labored hard and long for almost twenty years, many of those years added on because of his failed attempts to escape. Valjean is finally released on parole but because of his history no one will hire him or give him shelter. That is until a kindly bishop grants him a place to stay and food. But Valjean is a desperate man and steals from the bishop and is quickly caught by local authorities. Again the bishop comes to his aid by speaking up in his defense and Valjean is freed. His life begins anew because of the cleric's gifts of silver that Valjean had initially stolen and two additional silver candlesticks and because of the bishop's prayer to God that Valjean become an honest man. And in the powerful scene that follows, Valjean does indeed give himself over to God-nevermore to be a prisoner of his past.

So what was his initial crime? Out of love and complete desperation he stole food to feed his sister and her family. A stolen loaf of bread that might tide them over for yet another day changed the course of Valjean's life. Valjean recounts the years and looks toward the future as he sings:

*What have I done?
Sweet Jesus, what have I done?
Become a thief in the night,
Become a dog on the run
Have I fallen so far,
And is the hour so late
That nothing remains but the cry of my hate,
The cries in the dark that nobody hears,
Here where I stand at the turning of the years?*

*If there's another way to go
I missed it twenty long years ago
My life was a war that could never be won*

*They gave me a number and murdered Valjean
When they chained me and left me for dead
Just for stealing a mouthful of bread*

*Yet why did I allow that man
To touch my soul and teach me love?
He treated me like any other
He gave me his trust
He called me brother
My life he claims for God above
Can such things be?
For I had come to hate the world
This world that always hated me*

*Take an eye for an eye!
Turn your heart into stone!
This is all I have lived for!
This is all I have known!*

All for the want of bread was a man imprisoned for nearly twenty years. All for the want of bread was a life changed weighing in the bad and then good. A life changed forever.

We are fast closing in on the last passages that mark the unofficial season of bread.

Only three weeks ago we began in the Gospel of John with Jesus miraculously feeding 5,000 people on a mountainside near the Sea of Tiberius. With a small boy's lunch of five loaves and two fish everyone was satisfied.

The following week we witnessed as Jesus educated those who seemed to follow him from shore to shore not for what he taught or for who he was but because their stomachs were still empty. For he said to the crowds, "You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life...." "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry..."

And last week, the crowds were at it again as they complained and questioned him, 'How can you say you are the bread come down from heaven when you are the son of Joseph and Mary? We knew them both!' And once again Jesus tried to explain that he is the bread of life, much different than the bread their

ancestors ate in the desert. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.”

This morning Jesus picks up where he left off. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven,” Jesus says. “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” And in spite of his explanations the argument becomes, ‘How can we eat of your flesh? Gross! What in the world are you telling us, sir?’ It is beyond our sensibilities that Jesus didn’t simply pack up his belongings and disappear from the scene altogether saying: ‘Enough already! Let me find somebody who understands what I am saying!’ But he didn’t because he really wanted the crowd to get it. To get him. To understand that there is bread, living bread that goes beyond all earthly needs. That Jesus himself “is *the* bread that came down from heaven.” That He is the Bread that changes lives. Living Bread that ensures life now and for all eternity. He would be all they would ever need—all that *we* would ever need in our lives.

I vividly remember the days long past when my classmates and I prepared for our First Communion. The weeks of the priest and nuns teaching us in religion class that Jesus was very much present in the bread and in the wine. And that by eating and drinking Christ’s Body and Blood, our lives were changed because he lives within us and we in him. They taught us that by receiving him we became “little Christs” ready to be God’s helpmates in the world around us. Ready and able to feed both neighbor and stranger starving, starving, for love and compassion and forgiveness. Starving for peace, justice, equality, and a little more as Aretha Franklin sang: r-e-s-p-e-c-t. Much like Jesus himself, we were to be willing to do what was necessary to bring comfort and sustenance to those who cried out to be fed and nourished, clothed and sheltered. We were to become what we ate. It would be many years later that I heard the same thing said in a different way as quoted by St. Augustine of Hippo: “Believe what you see, see what you believe and become what you are: the Body of Christ.”

Even today the message is still the same. In the Eucharist God provides for our deepest hunger and our deepest needs. In Christ, God is providing the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. Not the kind of meal that sustains us for a moment but a meal that sustains us for our journey and work in the world and for the fullness of life now and eternally with God.

And there is another important side to this holy meal. We don’t dine alone, we don’t experience Jesus all by ourselves but in community. We all share in Christ’s invitation to gather at his Holy Table. And by sharing this holy meal WE

are ultimately bound together and built up to be the Body of Christ for the world. Together we become a people transformed, strengthened, equipped and made ready to feed and nurture others. We become part of God's amazing activity in the world that seeks to heal, restore and build new and lasting communities and relationships.

The Bread that Jesus provides is unlike any other bread that we will ever have in our lifetimes. Unlike Jean Valjean who stole bread to share, this is Bread that is gift, free for the taking. Jesus is the Bread that not only feeds us but changes our lives and hopefully the world for the better.

Amen.

*"Valjean's Soliloquy"/"What Have I Done?" from *Les Misérables*