There was no church when the scene in today’s gospel took place. There were merely followers of the itinerate rabbi Jesus—Jews who were interested in living out their conviction that there was one God who had created everything and who expected them to live their lives in a moral and loving way.

They knew the stories of their forebears, the Jews who had gone before them, such as the prophet Elijah and his miraculous encounter with God’s angel who fed him in the wilderness, saving him from starvation. They knew all the other stories too—of Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah, Noah, Samson, and all that host of spiritual luminaries. These thousands of people whom Jesus had just fed, miraculously, from a paltry offering of a bit of bread and grilled fish, these people knew what it was like to hunger and thirst, both physically and spiritually.

Their lives had been made both richer and more difficult because of their common belief. Rules and regulations and offerings and sins and pilgrimages and . . . you name it . . . had grown up around their basic belief, which had by this time turned into a religion. The rules and laws originally intended to help them follow their faith, assisted them in determining right decisions and actions in life, had become simply more obstacles to overcome in living out their lives.

This should be a fairly familiar story to us Christians, as we have followed the same path as they. Indeed, all religions seem destined to turn clarifications of understanding and aids to practicing basic beliefs into simply more lore to be learned, more tasks to be accomplished. This is especially true for the more hierarchical, elaborately developed branches of the church such as our own Anglicanism. The reasons for this are many—most of them born of a sincere desire to help each other grow in the faith, some of them from less laudable goals such as turf-guarding and authoritarianism. We shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves, though: even the most free-form, no-creed, anti-catholic expressions of the church develop their own measures for separating the faithful from the faithless. Or, more mildly, the seasoned believer from the neophyte.

At least for today—and maybe for ever—I’ll neither try to defend nor severely judge our own religion or others for this tendency. It’s just the ways things are, and I frankly love the lore and intricacies of our own brand of full-fledged religiosity.

Having said all that, I would like us to consider what it might have meant to Jesus’ followers on the lakeshore that day, and what it means for us today when he declared, “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.”

He has just been telling them that he . . . well, here are his own words, as we have received them:
“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

People—you know, *people*—are sometimes quick to say, “We believe in the pure, literal word of God without interpretation.” How do you do that when God incarnate himself describes himself with a metaphor? Did anyone see Jesus as a loaf of bread? Not even two thousand years ago. They got it: Oh, he’s ***like*** a loaf of bread and a cup of wine (or water, or whatever) that never runs out. And it’s not just our ***physical*** hunger and thirst he’s talking about.

But some of them—full of orthodox belief and years of teaching—were quick to say, “Oh, he’s just a guy. We know his parents. Where does he get off with this bread of heaven stuff?”

His response is to invite them to listen without finding fault, to look and listen with innocence and pure hearts, to open themselves to how God loves them and reaches out to them with open arms, turning aside their religious sensibilities and embracing them in that moment, the eternal moment.

Here’s his next statement: “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’” I take that to mean, “This simple lesson I’m teaching you is that God loves you with or without religious trappings.” It’s what I hear when he says, “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.”

“I am the bread of life.” In other words, “All that I say, all that I’ve shown you, *that’s* the bread of life, the whole business of loving the one who created you (and everything else) and loving your neighbor. The other stuff gets old and stale, but this bread, this love, lasts for ever, starting right now.”

His own words, as we have received them, are, “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” This bread, this life of mine, shows you that loving God and each other is eternal life.

What he didn’t say, because it would be such a buzzkill, a wet blanket, in that pregnant moment, is, “You’re going to mess this up. You’re going to show each other what it means to love each other. Some of your advice and guidance will be good and helpful, some of it will just leave you and the people coming after you scratching your heads and saying, ‘How is this supposed to help?’ but that’s all right. It’s what we humans do. We can’t leave well enough alone.

“But please, please, just come back to this moment, remembering what I’ve told you: whoever believes has eternal life.”

Paul’s counsel to the Ephesians is really helpful in this regard, moreso than all kinds of canon law and credal constructions. He’s writing in the shadow of Jesus himself, in the early days of helping people understand how to live out this belief: “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice [though you’re bound to feel angry sometimes], and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Maybe that’s one of the reasons I repeat that last sentence at the time of the offertory each week. We all need reminding of why we’re here in this church and in this world, and at the same time in eternal life: to walk in love as Christ loves us.

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