

Sermon for Sunday, August 26, 2012 John 6: 56-69 “Metaforo!”

Sick of talking about Bread yet? Yup, me, too. But our Gospel passage once again has Jesus talking about how he is the Wonder Bread to end all Wonder Breads, so we can't totally ignore it.

Yup, I'm tired of thinking about and talking about the bread thing. But the comforting thing to me in today's reading is this: the disciples are sitting there saying “We don't get it. This is hard. How are we supposed to figure this teaching out, much less explain it to others?”

If the disciples, who were right there when Jesus was saying these things, don't understand it, then maybe I am not such a dope after all...maybe it is just plain hard, despite Jesus' attempt to get us all to understand by saying he is the bread of life. It's a metaphor, designed to help us understand some very complex theological stuff. A metaphor that places him as the source of all sustenance and connectedness to our Creator. A metaphor that starts to help us sort it out. Unfortunately, we, like the disciples, aren't all the way there yet in figuring it out.

A metaphor is a literary figure of speech that describes a something by saying that it is, on some point of comparison, the same as another otherwise unrelated object...like saying a politician is a hawk, or a barbecued slab of ribs is heaven in your mouth...or Jesus is bread for us to consume.

Sometimes metaphors are a struggle for us, as Jesus' disciples discovered. Sometimes they can be helpful.

Fifteen years ago, Roberto Benigni's film “Life Is Beautiful” showed a man who dealt with his life as a series of metaphors, metaphors that helped explain the riddles of life. When something happened that challenged him and his wife and child, Guido would joyfully cry out “Metaforo!” “It's a metaphor!” and proceed to translate the riddle of the thing that was happening into a story about what was good. The most complicated riddles that Guido faced were about Italy in the time of Nazism and how he and his family, Italian Jews, were being taken to concentration camps. He used metaphors to translate the horrific things around him and his family into something different, something more joyful. He worked to protect his child, in particular, from what they were facing, by recasting it as a metaphor for something positive. Protecting his son from the vile truth, Guido told his son Giosué that they were just on a big holiday, and he turned the camp into a game for Giosué, claiming that they must win 1000 points to win a real tank and leave. Guido said he must complete “tasks” for the camp “moderators” (the Nazi SS), while avoiding impending fate with everything he could offer. At one point, a German officer required a translator. Despite not speaking a word of German, Guido stepped forward and made up the “Regole del Campo” from the German's body language, claiming that tanks, soldiers and such, in fact everything that could be seen in the camp, were part of a giant game of Hide and Seek. Guido said that Giosué could not cry, ask for his mother or declare he was hungry, because that would cause him to lose the “game”, in other words, death. Guido had crafted a story to explain what was happening in the form of a metaphor – this thing that was happening was all a game. In the end, as the camp was liberated and the tanks rolled in to the awful place to free those who were left, the little boy looked up, wide-eyed, and whispered that word that his father had used to protect him: “E vero! It is true!”

The metaphor that addressed the riddle of who Jesus was and why people should believe in him was as complicated in its way as the one that addressed the riddle of why good people should be taken to a concentration camp and put to death simply because of their religion. Literal folks could see Jesus as a teacher and healer and possibly God's anointed one, but could not understand that what he was giving them was spiritual life, not the overcoming of oppression. Literal folks could see the barbed wire and the guards and smell the odor from the gas chambers and identify the camp as a place where evil people killed innocents, not as a game that could be played to survive and actually laugh even as the threat of death hung heavy.

Literal people could not embrace the gift of the metaphor. But it is a gift, and a beautiful one, because metaphor is about possibility, isn't it? Seeing things differently. Wrapping our minds around something big and complex and difficult so that we can grow in new ways. And that is a hard step for us to take. It was hard for the ordinary people who came to hear Jesus, and in some ways equally hard for the disciples to do, since they had their own view of who they wanted Jesus to be. It was hard for others in the concentration camp to embrace Guido's *metaforo*, and they saw Guido as a buffoon, a crazy fool.

But in both stories, who survived? The disciples who embraced the difficult metaphor, knowing that they could not sort it out completely. The child who joyfully accepted his father's metaphor, despite what was happening around him. A metaphor can carry us to places our minds cannot.

We need tools like metaphors to get us through the difficult stuff, even when they don't completely resolve the riddles. And so we get another metaphor in today's readings. Take a look at the passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

He encourages the disciples at Ephesus, who were facing the hard work of trying to share what they had learned about Jesus and the Gospel with others. He says "Put on the armor of God... fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."

Another metaphor. If we are frightened, if we feel unable to carry on, if we feel that everyone is going to attack us for doing what God wants us to do, we simply strap on the full armor of God.

I don't know about you, but whenever I hear that phrase from Ephesians, I think about a saying that became popular among women my age a few years back. If you're faced with a challenge, put on your Big Girl Panties and deal with it. Big Girl Panties - yet another metaphor, akin to that Old Testament phrase "gird your loins." Toughen up. Put on what you need to put on.

A friend of mine has a serious chronic illness, one which weakens her very easily. She is retired now, but for a while, she tried to keep on working and found that it was important for her to put on full makeup every morning. Part of that was to mask her paleness and dark circles under her eyes, but another part was putting on her armor to go and do battle...like another metaphor, putting on your war paint.

And the thing that ties two very different metaphors together – "I am the bread of life" and "put on the whole armor of God" – is not so much a theology of who God is as it is a theology of what God expects us to do.

Take it as a given that we do not fully understand God. God is awesome, and we probably don't even have all the words we need to describe God, much less understand God. Jesus gives us metaphors to try to help, but in the end, we are still left with an imperfect understanding, and even Jesus knows this. Remember how he says elsewhere in the Gospel of John: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." (Jn 16:12)

So the disciples, those who haven't said, "enough of this *mishegoss!*" say, "okay, we're here, we believe in you. We may not understand everything, but we believe." And they do what?

They get up and go out and start doing things consistent with what Jesus wants them to do.

In other words, despite the fact that the metaphor of the bread didn't explain it all to them, they say that they believe and then they put on their Big Boy Togas, their armor of God, and go and do the work. What does Paul say? "As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."

And in doing so, they understand better than any words, any metaphors, who Jesus is and what they are supposed to do. It is the doing that finally takes us to the next level of understanding.

We are people of words. We like to be able to articulate what we understand. We use all the tools at our disposal, like metaphors, to explain things. But in the end, there is belief and there is action in response to that belief.

We may not understand everything about God – I've got many questions for our Creator when I get to heaven – and our attempts to try and use language to make God understandable may be imperfect, but the time comes when I – and you – are expected to put on the armor of God and show what God means to us. If we try and wait for the perfect metaphor to explain it all, nothing will get done. That's just procrastinating. Whatever thing we do when we put on that armor and share God through our lives and our actions, that is when we will really begin to understand our relationship with the One who created us. God loves us and guards and guides us through the riddles of life. We don't need a metaphor for that. Amen.