
Loaves and Fishes, Salmon in Particular

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins**

Some time back, I took a sea-kayaking trip to Alaska, about this time of year. Our group journeyed to Tebenkof Bay, into the wilderness of southeast Alaska, for a week-long sojourn.

Early one day, we found ourselves in the delta of a large stream. Beneath our boats was a river of salmon, coming home to spawn. Our guide gave us a streamside lecture on the ecology of salmon, amazing members of God's creation. This is especially true of Pacific salmon. Leaving their fresh-water birthplaces they journey out to sea where they roam the oceans of the world, returning to spawn at the exact spot they were born years earlier.

More than simply food for bear, ravens, eagles, or humans, salmon are in fact a parable of a complex, and life-giving set of relationships. DNA from Pacific salmon has been found in groves of Aspen at the top of the continental divide. Every level of the food chain will reveal evidence of the gift of salmon. When salmon die they generate the most biologically diverse forests on earth, honoring future generations with the gift of their journey. "They leave branches of streams no larger than a broomstick," the author Richard Manning has said, "and make their way to the ocean for years, returning weighing up to 60 pounds of biomass harvested from the sea. They bring this mass of nutrients back to the forest to feed it, and the generations to follow."

I think of this as evidence of God delighting in God's creation—a cosmic playfulness at the level of ecological communion. The grace in the story of the salmon is evidence of sacred connections of life-sustaining nourishment. As the poet Mary Oliver reminds us, "Let me keep company always with those who say 'Look!' and laugh in astonishment, and bow their heads." The gift of their living, and dying, and rebirth, is moving and powerful. A salmon is a metaphor of the deep ecological mystery of God's creation—a timeless reminder that in the cycle of life and death lies the abiding connections of all living things...of transformation, and renewal.

It is fascinating to me, then, that on another shore, this time near the village of Capernaum, Jesus gives a sea-side homily on the nature of bread, and a metaphorical lesson on what nurtures and sustains our souls. On this day following the feeding of the 5,000, the impromptu picnic was over, and Jesus and the disciples were looking for a quiet place to rest. The people had other ideas. They had been hungry, and they had been fed, and yet they did not know the depth of their hunger. "The bread you seek won't last," Jesus said to them. "I am the bread that endures, and addresses a deeper hunger. All you have to do is believe."

Our wise Alaskan guide said to us, "Broaden your horizons. The salmon is a sign of something mysterious, and life-giving in the ways of the connectedness of God's creation. They live their lives, and they give themselves away." Jesus says to us, "Broaden your spiritual horizons. I want to be more than a provider of physical bread. I want to fill the hunger of your hearts...to satisfy those holy longings. And then I want you to feed one another, in love."

Like the salmon, Jesus is to be broken, blessed, and shared with the world. He gives himself away, each moment. *Like the Eucharist we celebrate*, Jesus is more than a provider of *physical* sustenance. Our river guide said, "Pay attention; see, and you will believe." Jesus says to us, "Seeing is not always the same as believing; sometimes you have to believe, in order to really see." Both are correct. And both point to a similar truth: salmon may be a first principal of an ecological paradigm of gratitude. The only way to have a full life, and keep it, is to give it away. Jesus embodied this in his life, in which we are

invited to be creatively compassionate, in gratitude. “Every day,” Wendell Berry says, “you have less reason not to give yourself away.” Amen.

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