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Grace Episcopal Church, Keswick, Virginia
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“Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” ~an excerpt from John 6:35, 41-51

This is the third of five readings from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, all dealing with the general idea that Jesus is the bread of life. The Christian tradition still doesn't speak with one voice about what we're focusing on this morning—this idea of the faithful having eternal life and being raised up on the last day. What last day? The final judgment referred to in the Book of Revelation; or, perhaps, the final day of our individual lives; or something else? Raised up where and in what form? Raised up as a soul, or as a body? Raised up to a literal heaven or figuratively raised up as souls nurtured by Christ?

It seems odd to find these questions arising from John's gospel. As you'll recall, the author of John is concerned with the present moment—with the Word made flesh, with the immediacy of the Incarnation. “Eternal life” and “last day” language seem to belong more to the synoptic gospels—to Matthew, Mark and Luke—where the Kingdom of God is coming any minute not...but not yet. In those gospels, eternal life and last day “raisings” are the lure for faithful living. Not so with John. For John, faithful living is almost unavoidable, if the Living Bread is received intentionally. Our lives are transformed simply by receiving the Living Bread into our hearts and minds. So, what might it mean for Jesus to promise eternal life to a person focused on the living present?

Sister Helen McPherson had an answer I'll never forget. She was celebrating her twenty-fifth anniversary as a member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in my first year in that order. We met in the summer of 1985 at the convent in Greenwich, Connecticut. Helen had a Chicago-based ministry, but always spent two weeks in the summer with the Greenwich community to get her "head straight", as she put it. Helen had a unique sense of call. She believed her vocation was with the poor and homeless of Chicago. Others might have organized soup kitchens or clinics or low-income housing. Helen lived with the homeless instead. She lived under bridges and in forest preserves for most of the year, returning to her Chicago community house once a month for an overnight to check in and do laundry. I met Helen in Connecticut...when she was showered and wearing clean clothes. Her Chicago community members mostly remembered her looking and smelling like a street person. I'd been told about Helen's ministry before meeting her. But no one had told me about Helen, the woman. Just as well. Words wouldn't have prepared me for the immensity and depth of her personality. She was of medium height and build, but nothing else about her was medium. I suppose it was her passion for her work that gave her such present-tense urgency. Helen wanted to help everyone she met to understand the plight of the poor. She wanted the world to understand it so well that it would be unavoidable. She became the poor. She became their Word made flesh and gave voice to their horror. Everyone in Chicago knew Sister Helen because she was on television so often. Snowstorms, heat waves and crimes of violence against the poor always sent reporters in search of Helen.

She was an eloquent speaker. The homeless couldn't have had a more passionate, articulate advocate.

When Helen and I met, I was having a difficult time in the order. Sensing a change of pace might help give me perspective, she invited me to spend a day with her in New York City, to clear my head, as she put. We took the train into the City and then a bus to the edge of the area known as the Bowery. As I'm sure you're aware, the Bowery used to be thought of as skid row. The down and out ended up there when they were out of options. Today, much of the Bowery has been gentrified and reclaimed by the rich and famous. In 1985, when I was there with Helen, that process was just beginning. Today the place where she took me still exists—the Bowery Mission. I thought we might be going inside to volunteer, which made Helen smile. "No," she said, "Volunteering is too comfortable. Today we're going to *be with* the poor instead." And so, I spent the day as Helen's shadow, as she found her way into alleys and under fire escapes to sit with the people there. Her only instruction to me throughout the day was, "Listen to your heart. We'll do the head thing later." Frankly, my heart and my head were telling me to get back on the train and go home. Instead, I found myself sitting in an alley in the middle of New York City. I was busy being present to the rats scurrying along top the nearby dumpster, while Helen was busy being present to a woman telling Helen her story as though they had known each other for years.

On the train ride home Helen allowed me some much-needed silence. Finally, I exploded in anger at her and the dilemma she represented: "How do you stand

it? How do you exist in that world? Why do you choose to live in that environment? How does that help them? How does that change their reality? Get them out of the alley. Get them into a shelter. Get them some job training and some therapy. How does living alongside them help? What are you atoning for?" Helen waited until I was done. And then I heard her say to me the very same words she'd said to the woman in the alley, "Thanks for being real with me. What will you raise up today?" The woman in the alley was startled by that response, as was I. But Helen offered neither of us any further clarification. She just waited for the answer. In that moment, the homeless woman and I oddly became one. Each of us poured out our pain to Helen; and Helen received it, acknowledged its reality and then gently gave it back, slightly reframed. She asked what we would raise up. What would we lift up out of our pain? What voice would we give to our lives? She didn't try to take away the pain. She knew she couldn't. Instead, she asked us to.

I had the pleasure of meeting up with Sister McPherson one last time in Atlanta, Georgia—at Grady Memorial Hospital, where I served as hospice chaplain. Occasionally, I'd serve as chaplain-on-call when the scheduled hospital chaplain wasn't able to serve. That meant I spent the night at the hospital, responding as needed to pages from nursing units. It was early morning when the Oncology Unit paged me, saying a patient was actively dying and had asked for Communion. She was Catholic, but they couldn't reach the Catholic priest. I arrived at the nurses' station with my Communion kit to review the patient's chart before heading to her room. It took my breath away when I saw the patient's

name: Helen McPherson. I'd lost touch with her when I left the order and didn't realize she'd relocated to Atlanta. Her chart told me of the progression of her metastatic breast cancer. Making my way to her room, I supposed I'd find a few sisters from the order with her. Instead, I found Helen was surrounded by 15 street people—some seated on her bed, some standing nearby—silently present with her, as she had been with them. Helen was as surprised to see me as I was to see her. Though she was clearly dying, the fire in her eyes was still there. She pulled me close and said, "Communion for my friends, too." I only had 8 wafers and a tiny bit of wine. The nurses station provided a few rolls from the cafeteria and some grape juice from their refrigerator. I asked Helen if she wanted to say the Eucharistic Prayer, instead of me. There wasn't a dry eye in the room when Helen finished blessing the bread and juice with an untraditional prayer from her heart. I was just about to suggest we pass the bread and juice among us, but Helen asked if she could distribute the bread and I administer the cup. Reverently, each person came forward in turn to her bed to receive her final gift to them. She pressed the bread into each outstretched palm, saying, "be the Word. Raise up love." Instead of the customary "Amen", each person replied, "I will try." A powerful moment for us all.

When we receive the Bread of Life into our hearts, it asks us to answer the question with our lives. What's your answer? What voice do you give to your life? Helen knew. May we be willing to stay with the question long enough so that we might know, too. Amen.

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