

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

St. John 6:1-15: "Man Shall Not Live by Bread Alone."

March 13/14, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, You are the bread of life, and have promised that whoever comes to You shall never hunger: Grant us faith truly to partake of You through Word and Sacrament, that we may find refreshment of spirit and be strengthened for Your service; who lives and reigns with the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 60)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following Him, because they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up His eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward Him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" He said this to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do. / Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" / Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, He distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. / And when they had eaten their fill, He told His disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that He had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" / Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by Himself. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, the Food that our souls need so that we may live forever even though our bodies may die, dear fellow redeemed:

We could do without a lot of things we have in this life. We don't need dressers and closets full of clothes. We don't need TVs, computers, and smartphones. We don't need large living spaces, nice vehicles, and most of our possessions. We could learn to live without all these things. But we can't do without food. Food is essential to our survival. The body needs food like a car needs fuel – it can't run without it.

We heard at the beginning of Lent how Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness. That's a long time to go without food, and Jesus *"was hungry"* (Mat. 4:2). When the devil tempted Him to turn stones into bread to prove He was the Son of God, Jesus replied: *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"* (v. 4). He quoted these words from the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. They were part of Moses' message to the Israelites after they had wandered in the wilderness for forty years because of their disobedience.

God required those forty years of wandering to humble them and to test their faithfulness toward Him. In the wilderness, there was no way to find food for that large amount of people. The people had to rely on God to give them what they needed. Six days a week, He provided a type of bread for them called "manna." When the morning dew lifted, the people would see the ground covered with *"a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost"* (Exo. 16:14). They stooped down and collected it, and they took it home to prepare it and eat it. God provided this food until they entered the Promised Land of Canaan (Jos. 5:12).

In today's text, we find another group of Israelites in the wilderness without supplies of food. They followed Jesus because they saw how He healed the sick, and they wanted to hear His teaching (Mat. 6:34, Luk. 9:11). But now evening approached, and the people needed to eat. Jesus asked His disciples to give them something. "Impossible!" they said. "The crowd is too large! Our resources are too limited!" Andrew told Him: *"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"*

The disciples were thinking logically. But Jesus wasn't looking for logic; He was looking for faith. He wanted them to trust in Him no matter how difficult the problem seemed to be. He wanted them to see that the God who provided bread for forty years in the wilderness was now sitting right there next to them. *"Five barley loaves and two fish"* were more than enough to feed the thousands gathered there.

When the people saw how Jesus multiplied the bread and fish to feed everyone, they weren't slow to make the manna connection. *"This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"* they said. Moses had prophesied long before that the LORD would raise up for the people a Prophet like him from among them (Deu. 18:15). "Just as Moses gave the people bread in the wilderness," they thought, "now Jesus can give us bread!" They even plotted to take Him by force to make Him their king.

But the people had selective memories. They were so impressed by the bread that they forgot Moses' emphasis on the Word. What was it that Moses had said? *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"* (Deu. 8:3). It isn't that food for our bodies is unimportant. We do need it. But as much as we need physical food, spiritual nourishment is even more essential.

That isn't really how we think. We hardly ever go a day without eating something. On the other hand, we might go a whole week or even longer without tending to the needs of our soul. A continued lack of food eventually leads to the death of the body. But a continued lack of spiritual nourishment is worse than that. It leads to spiritual death and then eternal death. Physical hunger comes to an end. But spiritual hunger never ends in hell, and it will never be satisfied.

Think about the rich man and the beggar Lazarus (Luk. 16:19-31). The rich man had all he wanted. He *"feasted sumptuously every day."* Lazarus had nothing. He was sick and starving. Both men died, but they didn't go to the same place. Lazarus went to heaven, and the rich man went to hell. Lazarus was actually the wealthy one. He did not have food or any of the finer things in life, but he had faith. He feasted on the Scriptures and died with confidence in God's promise of eternal life. The rich man had plenty of food but no faith. He had his *"good things"* on earth but then entered eternal torment.

What good is it to have a full belly if your heart is not full of God's Word? What good is a new car if you have no concern for your new life in Christ? What good is earthly wealth if you have no interest in the riches stored up for you in heaven? All these earthly things pass away. They get burned up, and they break down. They get stolen from us, and they slip through our fingers. God gives us our many earthly blessings for our use and enjoyment. He does not give them to us so we can make them into idols.

Earthly bread was the idol of that wilderness crowd. They were not interested in the better gift that Jesus wanted to give them. The day after the miraculous sign, they found Jesus. And Jesus said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you"* (Joh. 6:26-27). And what was this eternal food? Jesus said, *"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst"* (v. 35).

Jesus is the Food of faith. He is the food our souls need. Apart from Him, we can only *"hunger and thirst for righteousness"* (Mat. 5:6). Apart from Him, we have nothing valuable to set before God. Even if we gathered together and piled up all the riches of the world, He would not accept it as payment for one person's sins. God needs nothing from us. We have nothing to bargain with for our salvation.

And that's why God did the bargaining. That's why He supplied what was lacking. He did for us what we could not do. God the Father sent His only Son to save the sick and dying world. Jesus said, *"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever"* (vv. 48-51).

There is no limit to this Food. Jesus is enough for the salvation of all sinners. His perfect life under the law is enough to satisfy the righteousness we sinners crave. We don't have to prove we are important or special by how much earthly stuff we accumulate. Our worth before God is not measured by how successful we are here. Our worth before God is measured by how successful *Jesus* was here.

We are acceptable before God because of the life Jesus lived for us—perfect works, perfect words, perfect thoughts. And then He went to the cross to perfectly pay for all of our sins. Fragments remained after the people ate the bread and fish. But no fragments of our sin remain now that Jesus has given His holy body and blood to atone for them all.

Jesus has even instituted a special Meal to assure us of this forgiveness. Its benefit is not found in how well it pleases our palate, or in how much it satisfies our stomach. This Meal of His body and blood in Holy Communion is given for our spiritual health. And if it is given for our spiritual health, it has benefits that last for eternity.

Even though Jesus had not instituted His Holy Supper yet when He fed the five thousand, He used language at that time that anticipated this Meal. Jesus said to the people: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.... Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever”* (vv. 53-56,58).

“Man Shall Not Live by Bread Alone,” said Jesus. Bread is important. It is right to pray for “daily bread,” which “includes everything needed for this life” (Fourth Petition, Lord’s Prayer). But Jesus gives us more and greater blessings through His Holy Word and Sacraments.

Jesus is our Bread of Life. We feast on His forgiveness, righteousness, and salvation and are filled up by Him every time we hear His Word and read it and think about it and speak it and sing it. His Word does not return to Him empty. Like the rain and snow that water the earth, *“making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,”* so our Lord’s Word is planted in our hearts, and it grows and nourishes us (Isa. 55:10-11). His Word brings food to the starving and life to the dying. His Word saves our souls.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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