

8.4.2024 Pentecost 11

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Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

“The food that endures to eternal life”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In today’s gospel, Jesus says, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* These words were spoken to people who had followed Jesus not because they believed in him, but because they had eaten their fill of the loaves. Jesus said to them, *“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life.”*

Though Jesus had just fed a crowd of five thousand people, it seems they wanted to argue with Jesus, asking him for a sign, saying, *“Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness.”* In reply, Jesus said it is not Moses, but God who gives the bread of heaven for the life of the world. In Jesus’ words, we hear the echo of his temptation in the wilderness, *“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”* (Deut. 8:3; Mt. 4:4).

Jesus is the living Word and bread of life, and to know him is to already have the bread that endures to eternal life. In partaking of the Eucharist, Jesus the living Word, bread of heaven, makes us holy people with a holy food that endures to eternal life. To believe in him, is to know eternal life now, during our lives, so that we might use our lives for him.

Yet despite knowing and believing this, we can still be like the crowds that followed Jesus: we always hunger and thirst for something more. We follow Jesus, yet we also hunger to possess material things and thirst to control others. Like Jesus in the wilderness, we are continually tempted to satisfy our physical and material appetites in exchange for eternal life. And so, we fill our lives and homes with food and possessions; we travel the world in search of unique experiences; and yet, we often remain unsatisfied. We relentlessly fill our lives with more and more, while remaining less and less spiritually fulfilled.

It’s not surprising that modern people are called “consumers” because we consume foods, alcohol, goods, and services. To be a consumer is a decidedly modern concept: a consumer is someone who uses up goods and services and in doing so often destroys the value of those things. We purchase and barter, eat and drink, and use tickets for events, performances, and travel. We “drive the car off the lot,” so to speak, and the value of those things we have purchased and consumed completely disappears or is often greatly reduced. In contrast, Jesus says, *“do not work*

*for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life.*” Rather than being destroyed, the value of the eternal food that Jesus offers multiplies within us as we believe, follow, and serve him. In partaking of the Eucharist, in listening to God’s word, in prayer, and in serving Christ, we discover his inexhaustible power. God’s word, the bread of life, is not a product we can barter, buy, or sell; rather, the bread of life is grace that freely gives value to each person, transforming one with a desire to love God and love one’s neighbor.

The bread that Jesus promises, feeds, forgives, and liberates us again and again over our lifetimes by creating a new and right spirit in us. To know Jesus is to be liberated from our relentless and self-centered appetites, so that freed, we might work for God’s righteousness and justice in this world.

In a hungry world, Jesus feeds us with the bread of life so that fed and forgiven, we also might care for our neighbor. In the weekly work of this church, we set tables for the hungry; we donate food for the hungry in our community; and we help all who come to our door. With Jesus, it’s always a both/and: Jesus both healed and fed the crowds, *and* he also offered them food that endures to eternal life.

If we turn to the very end of John’s gospel, we again find references to food as Jesus meets his disciples by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus shared bread and fish with them for breakfast and then, in dialogue with Peter, turned the conversation to a commissioning of Peter, saying, “*Feed my lambs,*” “*Tend my sheep,*” “*Feed my sheep,*” and “*Follow me*” (Jn. 21). This is the both/and of Jesus who both feeds and forgives us, transforming and sending us to a hungry world in need of the bread of life.

The world continues to hunger. People without food truly hunger for daily bread. People without shelter truly hunger for the safety of community. People living amid violence and war truly hunger for peace. In a divided world, broken by sin and selfishness, people truly hunger for a unity of spirit with one another. Amid differences of culture and the rhetoric of culture wars, amid differences of language and politics, people still hunger to be lifted into unity with God and one another. To be a Christian is to know unity with the Jesus who feeds us so that we might bear one another’s burdens. This is what Jesus was trying to teach the crowds and his disciples like Peter, saying, “*Whoever comes to me will never be hungry*”; “*Feed my sheep,*” “*Feed my lambs,*” and “*Follow me.*”

This is also what Paul is getting at as he encourages us “*to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...*” To answer the call of Jesus is to die to ourselves and our self-centered appetites; it is to walk with Jesus in lives of service to others. Paul encourages us to live with “*one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.*” Unity with Christ gives us a vision of

human unity and peace for the world.

Yet as a pastor I am also aware of how deeply rooted our sinful appetites to possess and control are. We push back against Christ and from truly following him alone. We instead align ourselves with the spirits of the age in which we live, and in doing so, we continue to divide rather than to unite humanity.

Jesus and Paul continue to reveal our naivete as modern people. We place our faith in treaties and international agreements that often work for a while only to be ignored or broken. We place our faith in science and technology as modern tools to overcome what is essentially a problem of the human heart. And so, we are often disillusioned because we fail to create enduring outcomes to feed our hunger for peace, daily bread, and spiritual well-being.

Jesus calls us to life, saying, "*Whoever comes to me will never be hungry...*" Jesus heals our hearts with grace that endures to eternal life. In the Eucharist today, Jesus again comes to us in bread and wine, so that fed and forgiven, we might serve our neighbor as his body in the world.

As the church, we are people of vastly different backgrounds, languages, nationalities, genders, and identifies, who find unity in "*one Lord, one faith, one baptism.*" We are Christ's body for the world that we might build up the world with love.

Come to him and you will never be hungry.

Follow him, and you will never be blown about by the winds and spirits of this age.

He gives you food that endures to eternal life.

He gives you the bread of life so that you might use your life as bread for a hungering world.

Amen.