

EVERLASTING BREAD

John 6:22-35

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

August 1, 2021

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The gospel lesson for the tenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 6, verses 22 through 35. This gospel lesson continues the narrative we've been considering for the last couple of weeks. It's the day after the feeding of the five thousand. In the middle of the night Jesus walked on water. Only his disciples know about that. And this picks up the next day when the bread eaters from the day before track Jesus down. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 6, beginning at verse 22, we read in Jesus' name.

²² On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. ²³ Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" ²⁶ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." ²⁸ Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰ So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?"

³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' " ³² Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the bread of life, which endures to eternal life.

Let's talk about bread. Bread is a basic human necessity. It's about the most basic and necessary food group, or at least it was back in the days when people actually did things, like walk to work or harvest their fields by hand. Today we're all about cutting carbs, but in the ancient world, people were on their feet, moving around all day long. They needed bread just to make it through the day. If they didn't get bread, they would faint on the road or in their field.

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That's why Jesus teaches us to pray for "our daily bread." It was the most basic physical need, so it's a kind of shorthand for everything we need to sustain this physical life. And the people in this gospel lesson were seeking bread.

This crowd had just received bread from Jesus the previous day, when he multiplied five loaves and two fish into enough to feed five thousand men, plus women and children, and have twelve baskets of leftovers remaining. On the following day, this part of the crowd caught up with Jesus. It's not the entire crowd of five thousand, but "the crowd that remained," even after Jesus dismissed the crowds (Mark 6:45). These are the people who wanted more of Jesus, or at least his bread. And they apparently didn't have anything they needed to get home for.

When they woke up in the morning, they couldn't find Jesus, which confused them, because they saw the disciples leave without him in the only boat. So when other boats arrived the next day, they sailed to Capernaum. That's where Jesus often hung out, so they figured they might find him there. And when they found Jesus, they asked him when he got there. We know what happened; Jesus walked on water. But the crowd doesn't know that, so they're confused. I doubt they would have ever guessed that Jesus walked on water, but they at least have a sense that something weird happened.

It's interesting that Jesus doesn't answer their question about how he got there. Jesus does this sometimes. Someone says something or asks a question, and Jesus' reply is completely unrelated. Whenever Jesus does this, it emphasizes that he's talking about what he wants to talk about. He doesn't let the other party drive the conversation.

Jesus' response is something of a rebuke. He calls out why they followed him, and he says it's the wrong reason. They ate their fill of bread, and they wanted more. We get the impression that Jesus' bread was probably pretty good. I mean, we already know that his wine was the good stuff (2:10). And if you have the ability to miraculously multiply bread, you might as well make it high quality. It was apparently good enough for these people to follow him in hopes of getting more. But Jesus rebukes them when he says, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves"** (6:26).

A couple weeks ago, when we considered the feeding of the five thousand, we talked about the difference between a miracle and a sign. A miracle transcends the laws God established for the universe. But a sign teaches something. So a thing can be both a sign and a miracle at the same time. That's how Jesus' miracles are. They teach something about who he is and what he came to do. But these folks didn't see the sign. They ate the bread. It filled them up. But they didn't understand what it meant.

The meaning of the sign is connected with the Exodus. In the days of Moses, the people of Israel found themselves in the wilderness with no food, so God rained down bread from heaven. He did this six days a week for forty years, and so he fed his people. This was our Old Testament lesson today (Ex. 16:2-15). The bread of the Exodus foreshadowed Jesus, who came down from heaven to give eternal life. So Jesus is the greater bread. The bread of the Exodus and the bread Jesus fed the five thousand were both miraculous, but they only preserved life for a day at a time. Jesus says to them, **"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you"** (6:27). In other words, don't be so concerned with the needs of this day, but consider the needs of eternity.

These days we hear people say, "Live in the moment." That's a fashionable motto. It means something like, *Don't worry about what comes next. Just do what feels good now.* It's really foolish. It's the kind of thing that works out for the people on TV, but in real life it's a disaster. We do have to plan for the future. And we especially have to consider that actions have

consequences. Our entire childhoods, our parents trained us to think about what comes next. And here Jesus is teaching us to do this on the grandest scale. Consider eternity. If there's any wisdom to the motto, "Live in the moment," it's that we should not *worry* about tomorrow. The God who provides for us today will provide for us tomorrow. But this does not mean that we should follow our passions today. Quite the opposite. We should serve our neighbors today, which often means crucifying our passions. And we should have an eye on eternity. We actually look past tomorrow, to all the days after it. **"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life."**

This everlasting bread is Jesus, but the crowd heard it in terms of natural religion, not the true religion. Natural religion is always some kind of works-righteousness. It's always something we do. It's not really natural the way God intended us to be, but it's natural to our sinful nature. And this is something we should be aware of and guard against in our hearts. Our sinful natures, when they hear God's Word, always think that we can get something by our good works. And this error does not go away as long as we live. We will always be tempted to think that our efforts accomplish something for us in God's Kingdom. You might even be sitting there thinking, *Oh no. Not me. I know good doctrine. I know better than that.* Don't be so foolish. We are always tempted toward this error. It may even be that we are tempted to think God is pleased with us because we found the right doctrine. That's just the same error in different clothing.

So the crowd, guided by natural religion, asks Jesus, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" (6:28). They think that **"the food that endures to eternal life"** is something they must work for, even though Jesus just said it's a gift. But it is not of works. It is received through faith. So Jesus answers them, **"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent"** (6:29).

Even this, we might interpret wrongly. Sometimes we think of faith as a replacement work. It's like God knows we can't keep all of his commandments, so he appoints faith as a replacement work. *If you just believe in me, we'll call it good.* But that's not right at all. When Jesus says, **"This is the work of God,"** he does not mean, "Faith is the work God requires from you." No. Faith is, literally, the work of God. You believing is God's work. Faith is not something you do. Faith is something God gives to you.

Natural religion tempts us to think that faith is when we decide to trust something. Natural religion talks about taking a "leap of faith." We don't really have canyons around here to jump over, so it would be like if the ice is kind of thin, and you don't trust it, but you force your body to walk out on it. This is foolish, but you can do it. But you can't force your heart to trust something you don't really trust. You can't force yourself to believe something you don't really believe to be true. You can force your body to do something, because that's external, but you can't force your heart and mind to believe something. Faith is the work of God. So the catechism teaches us to confess, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith." Or, as Jesus himself says, **"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."**

The crowd at least understands that Jesus is talking about himself when he speaks of the one God has sent, so they utter some of the most ridiculous words ever spoken: "What sign do you do, that we may see and believe you?" (6:30). Sometimes the Bible is kind of funny, and I think this is one of those places, because these are the very same people who received Jesus' miracle bread the day before. It's like they have the memory of a goldfish. But I think they're just trying

to bait Jesus into giving them more bread. So they even bring up the manna in the wilderness. They just want more of Jesus' miracle bread.

So Jesus teaches them the meaning of the sign. It was not Moses who gave their fathers bread, but the Father of Jesus gives bread from heaven. And notice how Jesus says that. He didn't say, "My Father gave them bread from heaven," but, "**My Father gives you the true bread from heaven**" (6:32). This is really significant. Jesus is gearing up for the big reveal. It's not a past tense gift, but present tense: "**My Father gives.**" And it's not just for their ancestors. Jesus says, "**My Father gives you.**" And it's not just regular bread, but "**the true bread from heaven.**" It's not like the manna in the wilderness was fake. Obviously not. The people would have died in the wilderness. But that bread, as awesome as it was, is only a shadow of the *true* bread.

The true bread is not an "it," but a "he." "**The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world**" (6:33).

The people say, "Sir, give us this bread always" (6:34). And I have no idea if they're being serious or sarcastic. Even if they're serious, they still don't believe (6:36). But Jesus finishes the big reveal by saying, "**I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst**" (6:35).

This sounds too good to be true, so we're tempted to interpret it spiritually. And by "spiritual," we usually think, "Not physical." But the bread Jesus gives *is* physical. Jesus' body, of course, is physical. And the bread and wine Jesus feeds us with in the Lord's Supper is physical. And it is, truly, Jesus' body and blood, as his words declare. We physically receive Jesus' body and blood with our mouths. And the benefits of it are physical.

Too often we think of spiritual things as being not physical. We think that spiritual things are on a higher level than physical things, as if it's better to escape the physical. This was an ancient heresy in Christianity, that there's this hard separation between the physical and the spiritual, and the spiritual is what really matters. It's false, because God created the physical world, and Jesus came in physical flesh and blood to redeem our physical bodies. But there's this error that still persists in the Church.

We see it in the culture too. There's this idea that the mind is right and the body is wrong. Or there's the idea that what we do with our bodies or put into our bodies is of little or no importance. Or we think we can make a physical connection without there also being a spiritual connection. And, as Christians, we really shouldn't be surprised that the culture has gone this way. And we shouldn't be surprised that we've found ourselves at a loss of what to say about it, because, for the last few hundred years of Christianity, we've bought into the error that the spiritual is what really matters. So we've been conditioned to think of eternal life as leaving this body behind. We've been conditioned to find God in our feelings, and not in the physical forms he has promised to be. This is all wrong. The spiritual and the physical are connected. It's all God's creation. He created us as body and soul.

One of the benefits of sacramental theology is that it grounds the spiritual in the physical. God comes to us in physical forms. Jesus came in physical flesh. We are baptized into Jesus Christ using physical water. We receive Christ's body and blood through physical bread and physical wine. We should expect God to work this way, because he created the physical world, and he doesn't leave physical things behind.

So these physical forms that God uses to connect us to him spiritually, they have physical and spiritual benefits. When Jesus says, "**Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever**

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believes in me shall never thirst,” he means that literally and physically. He’s talking about “the food that endures to eternal life.”

What do we expect eternal life to be like? As Christians, we are not looking forward to some spiritual, non-physical life in eternity. We are looking forward to a real, perfect spiritual and physical life in the new creation. We are looking forward to the resurrection of this body. Your body will be raised. For eternity, food will be placed in your belly. You will, literally and physically, never hunger and never thirst. This is only the beginning of the real, physical blessings of the new creation. And it is all because Jesus gave his real, physical flesh for your life. And that physical body rose from the grave. And Jesus lives with that body in heaven forever.

Jesus is the bread of life. He gave his flesh for your life. When you eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord’s Supper, you receive the true body and blood of Jesus that was crucified and raised for your salvation. This is not just a spiritual salvation. It is a complete, physical and spiritual salvation. Jesus took on human flesh to redeem whole persons, body and soul. Jesus is the bread of life, which endures to eternal life. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.