

THE BREAD OF LIFE

John 6:22-35

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

August 4, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Eleventh 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 hearing in the gospel lessons. For the last several weeks, you've heard sermons from the Old Testament lessons. But there's a continuous story we've been reading in the gospel lessons.

Two weeks ago, we heard about Jesus feeding five thousand men, plus however many women and children were there, so probably well over ten thousand people. And all they had were five barley loaves and two fish. But Jesus multiplied it into enough food to feed everyone and have twelve baskets of leftovers (Mark 6:30-44).

Last week, we heard about Jesus walking on water (Mark 6:45-52). It occurred in the evening after the miracle of that great feeding. Jesus dismissed the crowds, and most of them went home. Then he sent his disciples across the Sea of Galilee in their boat, while he went away by himself to pray. And since he had no boat to get across the sea, he did a very God-like thing and simply walked on the water to catch up to them. We heard those accounts from the *Gospel of Mark*. John tells us more about what happened the following day. So today and for the next couple of weeks, we are jumping over to John to get the rest of the story.

Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 6, beginning at verse 22, we read in Jesus' name. In the evening, after Jesus

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."

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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.

What is more important: the bread you will eat at this altar this morning, or the bread you will eat later for lunch? You might know the right answer: that the body of Christ is far more important than whatever we have planned for lunch. But, if we are honest with ourselves, most of us, myself included, probably give more thought to lunch. But Jesus says, **“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 the verses we just read, we start to get a hint, when Jesus talks about the Father giving us true bread (6:32), and when he calls himself **“the bread of life”** (6:35), that he might be talking about the Lord’s Supper. This will become much more obvious later in the chapter, and we’ll hear those passages the next two Sundays.

But in these verses, Jesus instructs us to order our priorities rightly. And the math works out. The food that endures to eternal life is far more important than the food that will satisfy us until our next meal. And that doesn’t minimize the importance of lunch. The food you will eat for lunch is just as important as it ever was. But it is next to nothing when compared to **“the food that endures to eternal life.”** And that food is Jesus, himself. He is **“the bread of life.”**

The crowd in this gospel lesson was seeking bread. They 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, part of that 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.

When they woke up in the morning, they couldn’t find Jesus, which confused them. The night before, 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 there’s something mysterious about it.

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. Politicians do this, and it’s kind of annoying. But when Jesus does this, we should accept it and pay attention. It emphasizes that he’s talking about what he wants to talk about. And whatever he wants to talk about is more important than what we want to know.

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 good. 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).

This is kind of funny. They know that Jesus multiplied bread and fish to feed them all, but the miracle isn't what interests them, just the bread. It's like they don't even care how Jesus did it, only that he gave them bread. So they did not learn what they were supposed to learn from the sign.

There's a 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 take it in. They saw the sign, but they didn't really see it. 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.

We live in a very self-indulgent culture. People say things like, “Treat yourself,” or, “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. Animals are wiser than us. Consider the birds, who fly south for the winter. Consider the squirrels, who store up nuts. Consider the bears, who get fat so they can hibernate. We have so much self-indulgence—right at our fingertips—that we neglect to plan for the future. 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. 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. He creates it. You believing is God’s work. Faith is not something you create or stir up in your heart. God gives it to you. It is his work.

Natural religion tempts us to think that faith is when we decide to trust something. Natural religion talks about taking a “leap of faith,” like when Indiana Jones had to cross an invisible bridge. But we can’t force ourselves to trust someone we don’t think exists. 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, and it has physical benefits. Jesus’ body, of course, is physical. And the bread and wine Jesus feeds us with in the Lord’s Supper are physical. And they are, 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. But that’s not right. God created the physical world, and Jesus came in physical flesh and blood to redeem our physical bodies. If our physical bodies don’t matter, why did Jesus come in flesh and blood?

Too often we think that the spiritual is what really matters. So we think of eternal life as leaving this body behind. We think that we 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.

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The Bible 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 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 given to you. 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.