

Laetare

10 March, Anno Domini 2024

St. John 6:1-15

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

Beloved of God,

As I noted in the paragraph that went out with the bulletin, it's quite interesting and yet wonderfully appropriate that here in the midst of a season marked by fasting and disciplining of the flesh, we are confronted with this text from St. John where Jesus miraculously feeds the thousands in the wilderness.

What does this mean? Why this account of superabundance at this time of the Church Year? When we think back across the last few Sundays we notice that there is a heavy emphasis upon the work of the devil - Jesus' temptation, the demon that afflicted the daughter of the Canaanite woman, and the demon that caused a man to be mute. In all three cases, the devil was using daily bread as a means of affliction. With Jesus, it was literally hunger and bread. With the other two, their physical well-being was under attack. And in all three cases we saw the power that

Jesus exercises over the devil by withstanding his temptations and driving the demons out of man. The devil works furiously to rob us of any good that God would give to us. Even if we receive our daily bread, the devil works hard to make sure that we cannot enjoy it. He tries to fill it with bitterness or to rob us of it all together. He works to fill our hearts with despair so that we neither ask God for the things that we need nor give Him thanks for them because they seem to be more of a curse than a blessing. He seeks every way that he can to make daily bread our idol that we trust in and from which we expect our good.

This is why, in the final petition of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus commands us to pray "Deliver us from evil." The Greek there is interesting because technically it would be translated "Deliver us from the evil one," which of course is the devil. Luther describes this as the summary petition because in it we are asking God to thwart the will of the devil. And what is the devil's will except that we don't believe God's Word, that we don't live holy lives according to God's Word, that we don't have our daily bread, and that we perish eternally without God's forgiveness?

Let us think back for a moment to Invocabit Sunday when we heard of the temptation of our Lord. What was the first temptation? "If you truly are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." And what was Jesus' answer (remembering that Jesus was out in the wilderness

and He had been fasting for forty days)? There weren't five barley loaves and a few small fish to miraculously multiply. Nor did Jesus take up the offer and turn the stones into bread to soothe His aching belly. Jesus turned to the Holy Scriptures where the Holy Spirit clearly states that "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord." (Deut. 8:3) Israel, rather than grumbling and accusing God of evil, should have contented itself with the word of God as they traveled through the wilderness. After all, it was this word that delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Moses was sustained in his fasting on Mt. Sinai by the Word of God. Likewise, Daniel was sustained by the Word of God as he fasted and prayed in the lions' den. So too, Jesus was sustained by the Word and will of God.

Like your forefathers, you do not live by bread alone. You are not sustained by the things of this world and certainly none of them keep your soul alive. It is the will and word of God by which you have life. God doesn't need bread or money or medicine or good rulers to keep you. His word is sufficient. This is why Christ led the crowds into the wilderness where they would find themselves without these things. He was teaching them and you that you have all things if you have Him. How sad when the children God feverishly panic about what they will eat, what they will drink, what clothes they will wear, how much money they are going to be able to save, how they can preserve their life in this

world for even an hour! We are so busy grumbling about what we don't have that we are just sure that we need, that we become blind to the rich blessings all around us and the true good things which God places before us.

The crowds were following Jesus (which of course is good) but, as St. John tells us, they were following Him because "they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick." (Jhn 6:2) That's what they wanted from Jesus - healings, miracles, bread. This is why, even after witnessing and benefiting from such a miracle, the crowds wanted to make Jesus king - they wanted Him to keep giving them stuff. Wanting such things from Jesus doesn't make you a Christian. The crowds, like us so often, can't think of anything they need more than the needs of their physical life as though we aren't anything more than physical beings. They wanted Jesus to just make their sufferings go away - give them food, heal their diseases, give them politicians they liked. Their eyes were bowed down to the earth as they followed Jesus up the mountain, as though all their good comes from earthly things.

But Jesus' eyes were lifted up upon them. He brought them out to this time of fasting and struggle in order to teach them of their true need - their need for HIM. This is why Jesus commands you to fast. It is why He brings you into times of difficulty and struggle. He wants to strip

away all your ways out and the things that you think will make your life better, your idols, so that there is nothing left but the one who created you, the one who redeems your life from hell, the one who commands the winds and the waves, the one who gives manna and quail and calls forth water from rocks. Jesus wants you to hunger after Him so that you will follow Him through the wilderness with joy, receiving the life and salvation He gives in His mercy as He leads the Baptized to the Promised Land.

You can hunger and chase after the bread of the flesh and perhaps you will be satiated. Perhaps you will put in the long hours and make the big bucks and have the lifestyle you wanted. But then what? What will you have? All of those things can be taken from you in a moment. And one day all of those things will be taken from you including your breath. “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Mtt. 16:26) If you want nothing more than an easy, fun life and a full belly, it can be yours. All it will cost you is your eternal salvation. Woe to the one who does not heed the Lord’s warning about chasing after the things of this life. Woe to the one who treats the means of salvation - the Scriptures, Baptism, Holy Absolution, the Lord’s Supper - as addendums to their life that they will participate in when they have a little extra time. Woe to the one who thinks the most important thing

God gives is a warm meal, a good job, a comfortable house, clothes on your back, and a way out of suffering.

Yet, notice what our Lord does for the crowds. He feeds them. He meets their need. They foolishly made no preparations and they suddenly found themselves facing starvation. But Christ had compassion on them and gave them their daily bread. He fed them in the midst of the wilderness because He actually did care about them, even though their hearts were far from Him. He makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. God is not vindictive. He doesn't deal with us exactly as we deserve. He doesn't treat us as we treat one another. He is long-suffering and desires our temporal and eternal good.

And notice how Jesus provided. He provided by taking the very little that was there. In the hands of Christ, the nothing that you think you have is infinitely more than enough because Christ is more than enough. He brought forth the wheat. He caused the fish to be caught. Every gift that God bestows upon you is sufficient for you. He never shortchanges you. He never gives the wrong thing.

But these things cannot save you. Even after you have had your fill and there are leftovers, you will still die because full bellies are not salvation. The Body and the Blood of the Son of God are life. They are

the food that preserves you in both body and in soul unto life everlasting. Christ is the true bread that has come down from heaven from your Father. If you feast on His Flesh and drink His Blood, you have life in you. If you believe in His Name, if you trust in His word and work, you will have the blessings of a clean conscience and the assurance of eternal life after the things of this world wither away.

And that is precisely why you have been drawn here this day to this mountain - that Christ may feed you with food that actually gives you life both now and forever. This is why it has long been the tradition of God's people to fast before receiving the Lord's Supper - to be reminded that their life is in Christ, not in a full stomach or a healthy body or a successful career or a huge online following. If you have Christ by faith, then even if you have none of these things, even if you are suffering, even if you are dying, then you are alive and all things are yours. You lack nothing because you have the Giver of all things as your Father, your Savior, your Brother. You have the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life.

Dear Christians, this is why it is our highest joy as God's children to be here in our Father's house around His table as often as is possible. It is why with the psalmist we joyfully say "I was glad when they said to me 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" I have had the joy of hearing the

preschoolers at Faith Lutheran School speak those words every time they go to chapel. We should put those words over the doors into this holy house and it should be the prayer of all us as we come to church. Coming to church ought not be drudgery. You can be certain that any part of you that resists coming to the Divine Service is of your sinful flesh and needs to be resisted. Faith never asks “Do I have to go to church?” Faith always leaps at the opportunity to be with Christ and to receive the life and salvation that He gives in abundance. Thus we hear of the feeding of the thousands during Lent to call us out away from the food of the world from which we are fasting so that we may hunger only after that which Christ gives.

God forgive us for turning the Lord Jesus Christ into a bread king who has come to fill our bellies. May He grant that we receive in true faith the bread of His Word and eagerly devour it with our hearts. May we receive our daily bread with thanksgiving and hunger for that which is eternal, which moth and rust do not destroy, and which thieves cannot break in and steal - the life and salvation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.