

Rev. Heather Apel – Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA

August 8, 2021 – 11th Sunday after Pentecost

John 6:35, 41-51

<sup>35</sup>Jesus said to [the crowd,] “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. <sup>41</sup>Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” <sup>42</sup>They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” <sup>43</sup>Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. <sup>44</sup>No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. <sup>45</sup>It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. <sup>46</sup>Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup>Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup>I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup>Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup>This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup>I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our heavenly father, and our lord and savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Are we tired of bread yet? Today's gospel reading is only the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 5 consecutive passages that we hear from this chapter of John – and all of them have something to do with bread. In fact, I know a lot of people (especially preachers) who reach this point in the lectionary readings and wonder what “new thing” could possibly be said about bread and Jesus! First, we heard the miracle of Jesus feeding 5,000 people with just 2 fish and 5 loaves. Then last week Jesus is presented as the “new and improved” manna that has come down from heaven, not just to feed the physical needs of God's people, but to give life to the world. This week we heard that theme continue as Jesus talks about being the bread of life which gives the gift of eternal life. In the final two Sundays of this bread discourse, Jesus will once

again talk about those who will abide in and receive the true food and drink which brings eternal life – his very flesh and blood.

It is a lot of bread talk – so much so that might become numb to the imagery and loose the deep impact of Jesus’ words in this section from John. There are many reasons why Jesus may have used bread as an image for what he was doing, a few of which we will explore today. First, as we’ve heard, the reference would have resonated with the manna in the wilderness of the Old Testament. This would have taken the Jews’ previous understanding of God’s provision and plan of salvation and rescue from slavery and moved it to the next level with what Jesus is doing now. It was an expansion of God’s plan of salvation as Jesus said, “"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (6:35)."” This is an opening of God’s kingdom up – not just for the Jews – but for *whoever* comes to believe in God and receive the bread of life. While this might have been welcome news to some, it was not always well-received by certain Jews who preferred to draw a line between those who were in and out when it came to being God’s people.

Second, bread was a very common thing then, as it is for us now. Jesus was proclaiming a message for all the people – not just the religious leaders or the elite of society – so he often used simple messages and imagery that would be easily received by all. It was bold and perhaps a bit foolish to declare that God could use an ordinary, common thing like bread, to achieve God’s will and bring salvation to the world. We know that it wasn’t just bread that Jesus was talking about, but it was his very self – his own ordinary human body which he was willing to give for the sake of the world. This common man, the son of Mary and Joseph, was also uncommon and divine, the very Son of God.

This is the radical claim Jesus makes in today’s reading, that he is the Son of God who has come down from heaven in common, human form, and offers to us

and to the world, the gift of eternal life. David Lose, a well-known pastor and theologian wrote this about this section of John, “...This is the claim Jesus makes in today’s gospel reading, the claim which offended the crowd who followed him then, the claim which still offends any who take it seriously today. For where we expect God to come in might, God comes in weakness; where we look for God to come in power, God comes in vulnerability; and when we seek God in justice and righteousness – which is, after all, what we all expect from a God – we find God (or rather are found by God!) in forgiveness and mercy.

This is the claim and promise Jesus makes today: that God became incarnate; that is, became carnal, took on flesh, became just like us, so that God might save us and all people who come to faith by God’s word!

The carnal God; the God who does not despise the ordinary and common but rather who seeks such out by which to achieve God’s will: this is the promise that rests behind the sacraments. For as God does not despise water, bread, or wine, such ordinary, common things, so we also know that God does not despise or abandon us, who are similarly such ordinary and common people. And so in the sacraments we find God’s promise to take hold of us and make us God’s own, to remain with us and to never let us go.”<sup>1</sup>

Which is what leads us to this bread of life which impacts our lives today. God has named and claimed us as beloved children in the waters of baptism, and at the table we are reminded that God has redeemed us with the bread of life – the very flesh and blood of Jesus. This promise frees us from our sins, and opens us up to a life of grace and forgiveness. In addition to these eternal promises, God also promises to use us here and now – to make use of our skills and talents, common, ordinary, inadequate or insufficient though they may seem, to continue God’s work

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-11-b/>

of creating, redeeming, and sustaining all that God has made. Just as God uses ordinary elements of water, bread and wine to bring to us the extraordinary gift and experience of God's saving word, so does God use each of us – our hearts, our hands, our voices – to accomplish God's will and be at work in this world.

It is not always easy to see or notice how God is at work, both in us and in those around us. Which is why God has given us the gift of community, and the sacraments of table and font – so that we can hear again God's promise of forgiveness and love, of welcome and new life, which is given to us in a way that we not only hear, but also see, taste, touch and feel. Through our time when we gather among God's people, we can step away from the confusion and uncertainty of life, and for a moment receive God's audacious and faith-provoking promises for our life, so that we can return to the chaos of the world with a renewed sense of trust, courage and hope. As I have talked with people about what has been most difficult in the last 18 months, a common theme of their responses is the loss of community that they have felt. We have been living in isolation – distant from our family, friends and neighbors – faces hidden behind masks – as a way to keep ourselves and others safe. Many communities and individuals were not able to gather around the table and font as they once did, and they had to find new ways to be God's people and connect with one another. This time has certainly brought new and creative opportunities to be the Body of Christ during a pandemic as we continued to notice the ways that God was still at work – and see, hear and experience God's promises anew in the midst of the challenges we face each day.

Jesus came down from heaven as the bread of life – so that we may have life – abundant life in the here and now as we live into the promises and calling as children of God – and also eternal life – which we catch glimpses of in this world. May we be strengthened and nourished for this journey of faith – through God's word, through the holy meal, and through our fellowship with our siblings in Christ

– so that God can use us God’s hands, heart and voices in the world, until we see the day when all come to Jesus and are never hungry or thirsty again. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### *Prayers of God’s People*

Rooted in Christ and sustained by the Spirit, we offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all of creation.

For the church of Christ in all its diverse forms. For mission developers, new mission starts, and all communities of faith exploring new models of ministry for the sake of the gospel. For congregations facing difficult decisions about their future. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For the health and well-being of creation. For shade trees that provide refuge from the hot summer sun. For lakes, rivers, and oceans contaminated by pollution and all who lack clean water. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For those called to positions of authority in our legal system, we pray. For judges, lawyers, law clerks, and court employees who ensure the fair administration of justice. For corrections officers and prison chaplains, that they would deal mercifully with those who are incarcerated. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For all who cry out to you in their affliction. For exiles, refugees, and others who face long and difficult journeys, uncertain about the future. For all who mourn the death of a loved one. For all who are sick (*especially those we name now*). God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For those who have been raised to eternal life, we give thanks. With all the saints we praise you for the bread of life that keeps us in your love forever. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We lift these and all our prayers to you, O God, confident in the promise of your saving love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**