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in the Season after Pentecost

Jesus Is the Bread of Life

Christians regularly pray for daily bread because we know we need the Lord's physical blessings to survive and enjoy life on earth. We need the Savior's spiritual blessings even more, however, because his spiritual blessings nourish our faith and maintain our relationship with God.

Today's worship begins a three-Sunday focus on words Jesus spoke in John chapter 6 where he identifies himself as "the bread of life" and promises that "whoever believes in me will never go hungry."

First Reading

Exodus 16:15-31

The Lord instructed the Israelites to eat the bread he sent with hearts of faith, trusting in his promises.

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 11-13

Beware of rejecting the Lord's spiritual blessings.

Gospel

John 6:24-35

Jesus identified himself as the bread of life.

Sermon

John 6:24-35

Introduction – Some people just cannot resist a discount. I don't always like to admit that I qualify for an AARP card, but 10% is 10%. Piggly Wiggly gives a 5% discount for seniors on Tuesday and Wednesday. Bed, Bath, and Beyond sends 20% off coupons in the mail. Big sales are even better sometimes: White sales in January, back-to school sales in August. Think of the mobs that attack stores on Black Friday. And then there's free. Free is the best. George Webb's isn't nearly as popular as McDonalds or Culvers these days, but when the Brewers won 11 straight games this summer, everybody remembered George Webb's. For years George Webb's has had a policy to give away free hamburgers if the Brewers win 12 games in a row. They gave away 170,000 burgers in 1987 and 190,000 more in 2018. The Brewers lost game 12, but the lines would be long if they won because there's nothing better than free.

The lines were long in the Gospel for today. The day before a group of Jewish people had participated in a spectacular miracle: Jesus fed and filled 5,000 men—and who knows how many women and children--by breaking apart five loaves of bread and two fish. Well, this was all free stuff and these Jews saw all sorts of benefits in a prophet who could feed that many people. They wanted more of this bread, so they chased Jesus down.

I can't see myself or any of you standing in line or chasing after Jesus for little pieces of barley bread and dried fish. Besides, we have an idea how this story ends. But there is a connection here; we may have more in common with these people in the Gospel than we suppose. We all think a lot about bread; we call it daily bread and we pray for it. When we pray the Lord's Prayer we understand that daily bread is everything we need for our bodily welfare. We should think about daily bread. Jesus wouldn't have suggested this prayer if daily bread wasn't important. But just maybe—no, probably—we think about daily bread too much. Our income, our savings, our health, where we live, what we buy, how

we succeed—these all come to dominate our thinking sometimes and they push more important things out of our sights.

The crowds that followed Jesus wanted the bread Jesus passed out to the 5,000: **Always give us this bread**, they said. We're going to speak the same prayer this morning, but we're going to pray with an understanding of Jesus' response. We say

Lord, Give Us This Bread
Not the bread we crave
Nor the bread we cherish

1. The nation of Israel was 1,500 years old by the time Jesus arrived on the scene and all of the good and godly things we've learned about Moses and David had pretty much come crashing down. With few exceptions, the Jews of Jesus' day didn't see God as a forgiving God but as a demanding God; their objective was to obey. They expected a messiah, but they wanted a messiah who would save them from Rome, not from sin. A man who could feed 5,000 could feed armies; a man who could heal the sick could heal battle wounds. This was what they craved: a prophet who would destroy the Romans and restore their nation and their lifestyle. John tells us that **Jesus withdrew because he knew the people intended to make him king by force.**

Within a day, Jesus showed up and he showed up on purpose. It was time to speak and teach. **Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.** This miracle—actually all of Jesus' miracles—meant to convince them that he actually was the Son of God who had come to be their Savior. But they didn't care about the signs because they didn't care about the Savior. All they wanted was the bread. That's what they craved.

This was all wrong-headed, of course. **Do not work for food that spoils**, Jesus told them. What the Romans rule, who leads your government, how your culture survives—none of that means anything when you're in your casket. If you're going to spend your best efforts and your busiest activities on something, **work for food that endures to eternal life.** Do everything you can, Jesus meant to say, to make the Son of Man the center of your life. **For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.** Do you see the signs? Do you see the miracles? God enables me to do these to win your faith and confidence. Work hard for this; strive every day to believe in me. I'm the one you need to crave.

Our spiritual mindset is totally different from these Jews. We all believe that Jesus frees us from the power of sin and the threat of death. We do work for food that endures to eternal life; if we didn't we wouldn't be here. But we struggle with what's important in life; we battle with our sinful nature over our priorities. We check for good weather every day. Do we check out our Bibles every day? We remember our pills every morning. Do we remember our baptism and the forgiveness we gained? We think about what's for supper and we look forward to going out to dinner. Do we think about what we receive in Holy Communion and what a blessing it is? Do we come to worship to get in good with God or to gain what's good from God? Do we worship to impress or to be blessed? There is a voice inside each of us that still craves food that spoils and that does not endure to eternal life. Too often we commit ourselves to daily bread more than to spiritual bread. We seem more concerned with what feeds the body than with what feeds the soul. And so we pray: **Lord, give us the bread you offer, but spare us from the bread we sometimes crave.**

2. With their mindset, these Jews heard the word "work" from Jesus and thought of only one thing: **What must we do to do the works God requires?** Jesus's answer wasn't what they expected: **The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.** Their response was: Prove it. You know, you aren't the first prophet to give us bread. **Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat.** At that point the challenge began. Jesus was about to expose and destroy everything they held near and dear. The Jews treasured their history and culture. They prided themselves as the sons of Abraham and the children of Israel. They prized their efforts to obey the law of Moses. But Jesus shatters it all. **Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.** Jesus is making them very uneasy and very uncomfortable. Their response is

sarcastic, but it's also nervous: **Sir, they said, always give us this bread.** And then Jesus applies the clincher: **I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.** Not your history, but your future. Not obedience, but faith. Not Moses, but me. You may cherish your history and traditions, but I am the one you need to cherish and love and trust. **I am the way, the truth, and the life.**

You and I confess Sunday after Sunday that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. And we mean it with all our hearts. But sometimes we fall into little traps or we set up little habits that get to be part of our lifestyle and tradition. We overlook little sins, shrug off medium sins, and make excuses for big sins. Our minds wander during worship. We eat our meals and fall asleep without prayers. We avoid talking about religion with family and friends because we don't want to harm relationships. We don't think about setting aside time for Bible study because it takes time. We love Jesus and all that, but we're comfortable with the way we do Jesus. And sometimes we forget that faith in Jesus is not a part-time thing, not something we can turn off and on. Faith in Jesus needs to be total and lasting. Love so amazing, says the hymn, demands my life, my soul, my all. And so we pray: Lord, **give us bread, but free us from the kind of bread we sometimes cherish.**

This sermon is about to end, but Jesus' conversation with the Jews doesn't end here. Jesus had more to say about the bread of life and we'll consider his words on the next two Sundays. Jesus' words are weighty and deep, but it's wise for us to hear them. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth—we heard his words in the Second Reading today: **These Jews all ate the same spiritual food as we do, but God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.** And so today and on the next two Sundays, we'll remember what a blessing we have in the Bread of Life. With faith in him, we never hunger and we never thirst. Jesus forgives us our sins, he protects us from Satan, he empowers us to live for him, and he prepares us for a life that never ends. And so we pray: **Lord, give us this bread.** Amen