

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost; August 18, 2024  
+ John 6:35-51 +  
“Eat Bread through the Wilderness”

**“I am the Bread of Life,” Jesus told them. “The one who comes to me will never be hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have also seen, and you do not believe. Everyone the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me: that I should lose none of those he has given me, but raise them up on the Last Day. For this is the will of my Father: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life. And I will raise him up on the Last Day.”**

So the Jews started grumbling about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They asked, “Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? So how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”

Jesus answered them, “Stop grumbling among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the Last Day. It is written in the Prophets, ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learn from him comes to me. I am not saying that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God. He is the one who has seen the Father. Amen, Amen, I tell you: The one who believes in me has eternal life.

**“I am the Bread of Life. Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that anyone may eat it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. The bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh.”**

An elderly woman once told me this story during a visit to her home: During World War II, the Nazis forced many 12- and 13-year-old boys to join the junior Gestapo, including this woman’s older brother. They were treated harshly and given inhumane jobs to perform, while thoroughly brainwashed by fascist indoctrinators. When the war ended, the few who survived had lost track of their families and wandered the country aimlessly, without food and without shelter, cruel, afraid, and disillusioned.

As a part of the aid program to post-war Germany, many of these youths were housed in tent cities, which predictably became places of rage, depression, and suicide. But there were a group of French and British doctors who did not give up on them. They worked with these young men (and, in some cases, still boys) in an attempt to restore their mental and physical health.

They found that many of them would awaken during the night screaming in terror. One doctor came up with an idea to help with this fear. After feeding the boys a very large meal before bed, he put them to bed with a piece of bread in their hands, which they were told to hold onto until morning.

With that, the boys slept much more soundly, because after so many years of hunger and cruelty, they finally had the assurance of food for the next day.

Jesus says, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will not hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. To the hungry even a crumb of bread looks good. To those who hunger and thirst for righteousness that they do not have and cannot acquire on their own, Jesus brings us words of hope and joy, words that calm our fears and close our eyes in peace, words for today and tomorrow and every day, because Jesus beautifully explains what he means when he calls himself the bread of life: this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that anyone – anyone! – can eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.

This is indeed good news – the best news there could be. Imagine if this news got out! We have a bread here that brings immortality, eternal life, a cure for death, a bread that has the power to raise you to life from death.

How soundly we should sleep: bread, life, forever! And it seems the demand would be overwhelming. The crowds would rival the crowds at major sporting events. The clamor here at Trinity would be like some kind of championship soccer match (I would name one, but I don't know any, but you know what I mean), or that shopping day after Thanksgiving.

This is the bread that Jesus gives: his flesh given into death for the life of the world. But the world often says, as the crowd said that day, meh, thanks, but no thanks, Jesus. We have plenty of bread of our own.

And that's the bread we break ourselves and burn ourselves out for: bread that does not last. Bread that's gone with the next economic downturn. I don't know about you, but a few weeks ago 3% of my bread disappeared in forty-eight hour during a serious stock market correction. What could I do to stop it? What can we do to stop all of it from going away in the end?

It reminds me of a famous author who spoke about a certain friend who devoted so much time and energy to fame and fortune. The author said, my friend reminds me of a dog chasing a minivan. What's he going to do with it even if he catches it? What can he do but watch it drive away again?

When the Israelites collected manna in the wilderness, the Lord made it last only one day. Then it went moldy and maggoty. There was a reason for that; he was teaching something: this bread is dead. It's temporary. It's for your life, which is also temporary, in this world, which is also (you guessed it) temporary. That manna was wonder-bread – they called it "What is it?" – but even that bread only lasted a day. God sends us that kind of bread, too. Maybe you don't eat Wonder Bread, specifically, but everything he gives you for your body and life is his gift from heaven. But remember: it's about to mold. And so are you.

Jesus says, Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life. He is lifting imagery from the Lord's prophet Isaiah: Why do you spend money on what is not true bread, and your labor on that which does not satisfy? Come to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fat. Incline your ear and come to me. Hear, so that your soul may live, and I will make you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love.

You want riches? Hear the word of the Lord.

You want bread that satisfies forever? Take and eat Jesus Christ. Now, I should point out that almost all good Lutherans – going all the way back to the Reformation – point out that Jesus’ words here are not about the Lord’s Supper. For three reasons: he had not instituted it yet; he was speaking mostly to unbelievers, for whom the Lord’s Supper is not; and, finally, Jesus here is speaking metaphorically about eating his body – it means to believe in him for salvation and eternal life.

But I will say this: Jesus has now instituted the Lord’s Supper. We are believers. And it’s true Jesus isn’t speaking here about the Lord’s Supper, but Scripture does tell us exactly what it is. This is my body, Jesus says.

The manna in the wilderness was a preview, a type of it, but like other bread, it went bad, and the eater of it still died. But that manna, the manna in the wilderness, provided a pattern, a pattern and a picture of the true Bread that God gives in the sending of His Son. This isn’t bread that you work for, but bread that is given to you as a gift of God’s grace. It is the forgiveness of sins and salvation that Jesus worked for, that he earned for you, that he sacrificed his body to give to you. This isn’t bread that fills our temporal hunger pangs, but bread that goes straight to your soul and a bread that will raise you up on the last day, because it is Christ who rose himself.

The Israelites needed bread to make it through the wilderness to their Promised Land. And we also need our Bread from heaven, to make it through our wilderness, to reach at last our promised land. We are in the wilderness, too. The other two lessons today contrast the wisdom of the world with divine wisdom. How could you sum up the wisdom of the world better than this: work for food that spoils; whoever dies with the most stuff wins. And how could Jesus’ wisdom oppose it more directly: I am the bread that gives life eternal. Feast on me, every which way I feed you. Feed on me in the good news of my Word, feed on me in my Supper.

This wilderness saps our energy. We’re hungry, we’re thirsty, and we’re tired. We need food and drink that endure, that truly satisfy our need. We’re dying, and we need life. We’re sinners needing forgiveness. We’re captive to sin and death, and we need redemption, release, freedom, and hope.

And Jesus comes to us. The Son of God in the flesh, the Bread of Life, comes down to us from heaven, born into our wilderness, to walk perfectly in our place, to die for our sins, to leave his tomb empty and return to the promised land he now calls us to. And he still comes down to us by way of the cross and the empty tomb. He still extends his hand from the right hand of God and says, here, take and eat this bread. He still comes down and says, this is my body given for you. my flesh which I gave for the life of the world. Here, take and drink this cup. This is my blood of the covenant poured out for you and for the world, my life for your life, my death for yours. Eat this bread, and I’ll raise you up on the Last Day.

In the name of Jesus: dear Lord, give us this Bread. As you have promised, lose none of those you have given to your Son. Feed us through this wilderness, and raise us up on the Last Day. Amen.