

Sermon on John 6:24-35
9th Sunday after Pentecost, August 2, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By Pastor James Erlandson

We continue our series of gospel lessons centered on Jesus as the bread of life by asking ourselves, what does Jesus mean when he says “whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty?” Does Jesus mean this literally? I don’t think so. Plenty of people of faith are literally hungry and thirsty today. So he can’t mean that. So just what does Jesus mean?

Let’s go back and start where Jesus did, with bread. We’ve all eaten bread, and know that bread can really fill you up. It can be very good for you, even fat-free and low on calories, if you eat some good, multi-grain or whole-wheat bread without sugary icing, and go easy on the butter. But then, there are many kinds of bread, and some are better for you than others. It runs the whole gamut, from whole-grain, wheat bread, to rye or pumpernickel, to coffee cakes and dessert breads, banana bread, cinnamon, cranberry or even rhubarb flavored breads. Students on a budget say that you can live very well in Paris on a loaf of French bread and a chunk of cheese! Then there are the mass-produced white breads that children like, bleached of all their nutrients, soft and flavorless, called (ironically) – *wonder bread*. Not because this bread “builds strong bodies twelve ways” like the old advertising used to say, but because it’s a wonder that children love it so much when it is so “not” good for you, and makes so much money for those who bake it! But I digress!

My point is that some bread is much better for you than others. Wonder bread is nowhere near as good for you as a loaf of home-made multi-grain wheat bread. But some people still prefer, or even crave, “wonder bread” and turn up their noses at the good stuff. But others always seek new recipes for the homemade bread that is really good for you, and won’t settle for anything less. Maybe that gives you a hint as to what Jesus is looking for. Because bread is like life. You can seek what is truly good and satisfying, healthy and life-giving – or you can be enticed by what only “seems” like bread, but isn’t, and never find the true life that God is offering us. We often look for sweet cakes, when Jesus offers us the bread of life!

Our lessons start today in the Old Testament book of Exodus, when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness after being led by Moses out of Egypt, searching for God’s Promised Land. They were getting very hungry and thirsty, so they started to complain to Moses and Aaron. (Have you ever been on a road trip “vacation” when the kids start to complain about the bad food, that they’re bored, and they wish that they were back home playing video games? Well, this is that

road trip from hell!) The people complained that when they were slaves in Egypt, at least they could eat their fill of bread when they sat by the cooking pots their masters set out for them. (They forgot their original complaint about the tough life of slaves.) Now they were hungry, and they wanted to eat. So where was the food?

But God didn't get angry in return. God heard their complaint, and understood that they were hungry. God responded by providing them with *manna from heaven*. Every morning when they woke up, the people could gather up flakey, bread-like morsels that came with the morning dew. If they ate it right away, it satisfied their hunger. If they tried to save it for later, it spoiled. So each day God provided bread in the morning, and birds to eat in the evening. The people learned how God literally provided their daily bread. The psalm says, "So the people ate and were well filled, for God gave them what they craved!"

Then, in the gospel, we see again how the crowds kept coming, looking for Jesus after he had fed 5000 people with bread and fish. They crossed the Sea of Galilee in boats looking for him, until they found him on the other shore. Jesus knew why they were looking for him – he had fed them until they had eaten their fill with loaves of bread. They came because he had filled their stomachs, but Jesus challenged them with something more – his teaching about the life seeking God – the real bread of life! He reminded them of that story from Exodus that they knew very well. Their ancestors had gone to Moses with their hunger, and God had provided bread from heaven - *manna*. So it wasn't Moses, but God who provided the bread, which gives life to the world. And the people said, "Sir, give us this bread always." Knowing that they didn't really understand (for they were still thinking about their stomachs), 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.*" Jesus would give up his body so that the whole world would have life.

So, what kind of bread are YOU seeking? What are you looking for? Are you looking only for bread that will fill your stomach, or satisfy your cravings, or are you seeking the bread of life in God that Jesus offers us all? That is the real question of the day. How you answer it makes all the difference in the world!

Today in our world there are many things that human beings are seeking, and it goes far beyond daily bread. In America we have enjoyed an abundance of food, so that no one needs to go hungry – and combined with a sedentary life-style, has resulted in a new problem of obesity in both the old and the young. There is an over-abundance of material things that people have learned to need and desire, that have little to do with feeding and clothing our bodies. We adults have come to take for granted our comfortable homes with their furnishings, automobiles that do more than just provide transportation, and we depend on computers, the internet, and other technologies that entertain us as well as help us communicate. Our children have also learned to enjoy and desire our many technological toys - from

video games to Play Station, guitar hero and Wii, and now most every teenager either has or is asking for a cell phone or I-pod. But like the Israelites in the desert who discovered that trying to hoard manna only left them with baskets of spoiled bread, so we are discovering how our over-abundance is leading us to obesity and empty possessions of which we tire easily, and give us no real satisfaction. Most of us are still hungry, if not physically, for those things that truly satisfy: such as good health, home and family, daily work, and a relationship with the God who created us for a truly abundant life.

So you and I come to worship Sunday after Sunday, seeking something. What is it that you and I seek? Is it companionship with a community of faith that loves us (or at least puts up with us and our failings!), in a world where true friendship is rare and companionship is hard to find? Is it entertainment that we seek – hearing music sung or played well, or a spoken Word that inspires and challenges us? Is it the mystery of the holy that draws you, with stained glass and candlelight, incense and prayers rising up to an unseen God? Or do you mainly come for the food and the coffee shared afterwards with friends in the church undercroft? It could be any or all these things – and maybe, if we're honest, the conversation with other human beings over coffee and pastries might be the most urgent craving we have, more so than the satisfying of any urge to worship God!

But don't feel so bad! Remember, the most important desires of the Israelites were first, freedom from slavery in Egypt, which led them to follow Moses towards that a Promised Land of God. Then they were hungry in the wilderness, so their greatest craving was to fill their bellies with bread and meat. Those who first came to Jesus wanted him to heal their sick, and even more appeared when they found that they were also fed when they came to him – Jesus put bread and fish in their stomachs, not just words! To them, perhaps, it was just a secondary treat that Jesus satisfied their spiritual needs with words of grace and good news from God – maybe they just considered that dessert! So we are much like them, coming to worship in this place for any number of reasons, but in the end, find ourselves fed by the words of our savior and Lord, Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, who said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Whatever our reasons for coming, Jesus offers himself - the bread of life - to everyone who comes! You don't have to be a saint to receive the free gift – you and I can also be a poor, hungry sinner who just wants a piece of bread to bring us to another day. But when we come and eat, we will discover through faith, that this is not just *any* bread that Jesus gives: it is the bread of God, which comes down from heaven to us, and gives life to the world! Then may we say in response, “Lord, give us this bread always!” For then we will never hunger or thirst again! Thanks be to God, who sent a Son to give us bread, and life, forever. Amen.