

Sermon on John 6:24-35
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 2, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Is Faith = Food?

One thing that has always interested me about Jesus is how much he talks about food. He fasted in the wilderness and refused to turn stones into bread when the devil challenged him about his hunger. He turned water into wine. He ate with tax collectors and sinners (he ate at peoples' homes A LOT – and wasn't picky about who he ate with)! He fed 5000 with five loaves and two fish (that was last week's lesson, remember?). He shared a Last Supper in his final gathering with his disciples, and his followers have eaten this meal in remembrance of our Lord ever since! And then, congregations gather over food outside of this holy meal as much or more than for any other reason. Coffee hours, potlucks, anniversary and wedding dinners – we spend a lot of time eating together here! Which begs the question: do we worship God in Christ Jesus, or do we worship “food, glorious food”? To outsiders unfamiliar with our practices, maybe it looks more like food is our god!

But it's not only Jesus and his followers in the New Testament who seemed “obsessed” by food. The Old Testament is full of stories about food, famines and feasts as well. How God our Creator has provided God's children with food to nourish our bodies has been apparent ever since God created the Garden of Eden, and placed the first humans there. In our first lesson from the book of Exodus how the Israelites complained to Moses when they became real hungry. It had been 45 days since they had crossed the Red Sea out of Egypt, and the journey in the wilderness was much farther, hotter and drier than they had ever expected. They were hungry, and they were thirsty. Their children were saying, “Are we there yet?” – and the parents had no answer. So the whole congregation of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. *“If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”* They remembered how they had just enough to eat back in Egypt, but in their hunger they totally forgot about how painful and degrading slavery had been. Then Moses went to God with their complaints, instead of punishing them, and to their surprise and amazement, the Lord heard their cries! Every morning God provided manna from heaven – a sticky, bread-like substance, and quail every evening for meat – God gave them all the food that they needed. And it kept coming, but “just enough” - the people could collect only what they

needed each day. Still, whenever you say *manna from heaven*, people know that you are referring to nourishment that only God can provide for us, which we can't make ourselves.

In John's gospel, we pick up the story of Jesus from where we had left him last Sunday, after the feeding of the 5000. The next morning the crowd discovered that Jesus and his disciples had left, so they all got into boats to look for him. When they found Jesus on the other side of the sea, Jesus knew why they had come. It was because they had eaten their fill of the bread and fish. (Can you blame them?) But then this dialog begins between Jesus and the crowd, and he spoke to them in a riddle, saying "*Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.*"

What kind of work should they do, they asked? Is it a sacrifice that they should offer to God in the Temple? What is it that they should contribute, make, or do for the synagogue? Jesus said that the work of God is "*to believe in him whom God has sent.*" But what would Jesus do to show them who he was – what sign would he perform so that they would believe? Could Jesus provide manna from heaven, like the Lord had done for Moses and their ancestors in the wilderness? Was Jesus as close to God as Moses? Jesus answered that it wasn't Moses who had given them manna from heaven, but God himself. "*The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*" And like the Samaritan woman at the well, when Jesus said he would give living water gushing up to eternal life, asked Jesus to "give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming to this well to draw water," the people all said, "Lord, give us this bread always!" Perhaps they didn't understand what Jesus was really offering them, but it sounded so inviting!

And then came those words that have echoed with grace to us throughout the centuries, when 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.*" It was an amazing promise to all believers. This wasn't just any old bread and wine that they would get through Jesus – this was life-giving bread! Life forever!

"*I am the bread of life*" – just like the words of God (Yahweh) to Moses in the burning bush – I am the Lord your God. Jesus used the same words when he said "I am the bread of life" to identify himself to the people. Another metaphor for who Jesus is: like the bread which wards off hunger and nourishes, Jesus is the bread of life.

Today we continue to look for metaphors, descriptive words that will tell us who Jesus is, who God is, what our Lord does, and promises to us. Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus the bread of life, Jesus as the one who provides the water of eternal life – all these, and other words which describe the *life* that God gives us!

But our lessons today started with the complaints of the Israelites to Moses in the wilderness. We, too, have our own complaints. So, what are they? We probably have many of the same complaints as the people of the Bible: like, when and how will God show God's self to us? Because we are all looking for signs of God's presence in the world. When we are suffering – from hunger or thirst, from illness or aging, from poverty or loneliness, we can bring our complaint to God. Where are you Lord, why have you abandoned me, O God – *even Jesus* had those complaints, when he suffered on the cross! So God has heard them all!

Our complaints, no matter how great – or petty – don't go into a big “dead letter” file in heaven. They are all heard by our Lord – as are all our prayers – of praise, of thanks, of lament, or complaint. Jesus doesn't dismiss them, or rate them – he hears them, and “intercedes for us with the Father” (as scripture says). We might not hear or comprehend an answer, but they are heard.

And for whatever we bring to the Lord in prayer or complaint, this is our encouragement to keep it coming - when Jesus says to you and me, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* We hear these words when we are invited to the Lord's Table for holy communion, to receive Christ's body - the bread of life - in the bread we eat and the blood of Christ, the wine that we drink.

But today we take seriously the essentials of life – the “bread” – that we need to survive. We work so hard for this bread – the food – that we eat, for all that we are striving for in this life. The Israelites sought this when they dared follow Moses out of slavery in Egypt for a new land which God promised them. We seek the same things: freedom, food and shelter, community and safety. We also work for things that give us pleasure, for material possessions, maybe not only the things that we need to survive. So what kind of bread are YOU working for?.

Perhaps sometimes we are seeking the wrong things from God; maybe we are expecting way too much, or way too little. Maybe we think God is going to grant all our desires, like a cosmic Santa Claus – or maybe we don't think God hears anything from us, that God is too distant to care about our needs. But the word from our Lord Jesus is that God is here, God does care, and God hears us.

Today Jesus gives us an invitation to stop working so hard for that which doesn't get us anywhere, or only seeking the bread that perishes. Of course, we need the daily bread, the work and the food and water that nourishes our bodies for life in this world. But Jesus invites you and me to come to him for the nourishment that not only feeds us today, but lasts a lifetime, and then continues on into eternal life! Jesus says, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty!”*

So let us all say in response, **Lord, give us this bread always! Amen.**