

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 5 (Proper 13)

“It’s my bread and butter”...”I devoured it”...”A feast for the eyes”...etc., etc. Food imagery has long dominated our speech. We find it useful as a metaphor to describe so many things. God does too. Jesus is the bread of life, the true bread which has come down from heaven.

But what do we really mean? If I devour a book that means it is a good read. If I devour a widow’s house, that means I am an uncaring financier. A feast for the eyes could be a flower garden or a friend. What does it mean to call Jesus bread of life? The imagery is so plastic that we have a hard time getting our heads around it.

God seems to be saying to us today just how important Jesus is. Without food we die. Our bodies burn the stuff, we oxidize it and turn it into the energy which moves our muscles and pumps our blood. It powers our brains and makes life itself possible. Without food, we are dead. Without Jesus, we are dead. He is that kind of important. We could also say he is the air we breathe, or the water we drink, indeed he compares himself to the water of life too, does he not?

Jesus thus asserts for us and our hearers that he is something we cannot live without, a daily and constant presence. But too often we think that means I need to be cognizant, attentive, and focused on that. But keep the food imagery here. I don’t exactly know what I had for dinner three months ago tonight. But I do know that it fed me and it sustained me for the days and deeds that followed. Had I not had anything to eat that night, I bet I would have remembered that. I think there is another thing to say here. Jesus is doing all these things whether we are aware of them or acknowledge them or not. Food is sustaining me if I think about it or not.

In the coming weeks we will explore the whole imagery of food. It is tough territory actually. We eat too much, many of us are on a diet of some sort, or at least conscious of what we eat and what it does to us. If we listen to our physicians, we are careful about how many trans-fats we consume, what sort of cholesterol we are eating, how much fiber, and who knows what else. Are we nearly so discerning when it comes to what we put into our spiritual selves? Should we be? Food is an abundant thing for us. We don’t experience it as a fundamental need, at least most of us don’t and I have the girth to prove it in my case. Can we really hear this word as the people of the first century did? They were all hungry most of the time. I sometimes think we should be preaching Christ as the rest for the weary. That resonates with me much more as I wearily get up and grab another sandwich.

Yet, food remains such a powerful metaphor. It pulls us together, it gives us joy, it makes our parties festive and our funeral luncheons comforting. Food is amazing stuff. Food is the first expression of love we get from our mother. Wise business men who are in sales will often bring a client to lunch to build the relationship. Food does strange things to us.

Today Jesus declares that he is the bread of life: Whole wheat? Wonder bread? Pita or tortilla? Focaccia? What sort of bread? A bun a biscuit or a loaf? Crusty? Gluten free? Whole grain?

This is a great time to be a preacher.

Collect of the Day

Merciful Father, You gave Your son Jesus as the heavenly bread of life. Grant us faith to feast on the Him in Your Word and Sacraments that we may be nourished into life everlasting; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God is the merciful Father. You almost have to hear the parable of the prodigal here resonating in the background. Fathers, because they are so involved in the lives of their children, are often given occasions to show mercy. The more you love, the more you can be merciful. You might be able to show mercy to a total stranger, but it is almost a daily experience with the people you love. The Father is merciful.

He has given us a gift, his Son, the heavenly bread of life. Today we focus on the nourishment that is Jesus. Like bread, like the calories we take in, he sustains my life itself. Without the bread, without the food, we starve, we die. He is that sort of important for us. A t-shirt I once saw said, "It's not that life is so short, it's just that you're dead so long." Without Jesus that shirt is true. The old pagans used to have an image of the human life that was actually rather accurate. Like a bird which flew into a feasting hall from the dark. It flew in one end and then out the other, the brief span of flight in the light was the human life. It came from darkness and soon returned to darkness. The light was so short.

Jeff Gibbs has written spoken extensively on the fact that we do not understand death in a biblical way. He wrote an article in the spring, 2014 Concordia Journal entitled "Christ is Risen, Indeed: Good News for Him, and For Us." If you have not read it, I would encourage you to do so. We often avoid death discussion and soften it when call it a portal, a gateway, a transition, etc. When we do that, we suck the impact and meaning out of calling Jesus the Bread of Life. When we diminish the Law, we commensurately diminish the Gospel.

Jesus, as the bread of life, speaks to the brutal and harsh reality of our death. In order to hear that, we must first acknowledge the brutal and harsh reality of death. We don't need to be afraid of doing that because feasting on the bread of heaven, we continue in the light of life. The death is undone. The hard and bitter understanding of life as short and without purpose is suddenly replaced by a picture of life which is filled with life and potential because it is filled with Him.

The operative issue at work here is Faith. The preacher will always want to exercise a little caution as we talk about this word. Too often modern Christians don't understand Faith as a dynamic and living relationship with God. Too often we have a rather Thomistic understanding of faith as sort of a utility company. We plug into faith and out comes all sorts of good things, but faith is really a relationship, not simply a source of some spiritual power or a virtue which we practice.

We have earlier expressed that English has a fundamental deficit in this regard. We have the noun belief which is paralleled with a verb: believe. But for faith, there is no verb, we are stuck

with just recycling the verb believing. But belief is a propositional thing and too many of our parishioners are already convinced that they have studied the catechism and assented to what it says and that is faith. But that is really belief. Faith, is something more than that. Greek is not so bereft, there is a verb form of the word faith (pistis) in Greek, it is only really translatable with a new word “faithing” (pisteuo). Most of the time when you see the verb “believing” in the Bible, the real word behind it is pisteuo, or “faithing.”

The difference is significant. Luther used the illustration of a ship, so let’s update that with an airplane. At the airport I can believe that the plane is going to Kansas City. I can assent that it is true. It is another matter entirely to buy the ticket and entrust my life to the pilot and the crew and to “faith” that they are actually going to deliver me to the airport in KC. Thus we will want to talk about the faith which feasts on Jesus carefully. This is not just assenting that Jesus is in the bread of the Lord’s Supper or that he meant it when he promised to be here, this is the trust which says that his presence in my whole life, and, yes, that sacrament too, his presence in my life is that which gives me life itself. I not only see it there, I need it there.

We are given to feast on Jesus, this is not calorie counting, this is feasting on Jesus. Have you ever enjoyed feasting by yourself? It is almost oxymoronic to think about that. There is a strong fellowship component to feasting. The preacher will want to keep in mind the communal and relational elements which are found in food for us.

Exodus 16:2-15

They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ³ and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “At evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?” ⁸ And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD.”

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, ‘Come near before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.’” ¹⁰ And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ And the LORD said to Moses, ¹² “I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³ In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. ¹⁴ And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. ¹⁶ *This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.’*” ¹⁷ And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. ¹⁸ *But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat.* ¹⁹ And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over till the morning.” ²⁰ *But they did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them.* ²¹ *Morning by morning they gathered it, each as much as he could eat; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.*

I always pointed out to my confirmation classes that they should be grateful that they were not the wandering Israelites. They only have school cafeteria mystery meals for a few years. The Israelites spent forty years eating indeterminate food. Manna literally means “what is it?” I spent a few years eating “What is it?” when I was in high school and college in the old Concordia system. Can I see why these folks grumbled once in a while? ☺

Interestingly they said the same thing when Jesus was walking across the water in the Gospel lesson for last week. “What is it?” they cried. They were terrified.

Moses has led the people of Israel out of Egypt into one of the harshest deserts in the world. They are afraid and they are hungry and thirsty and they complain about it. Before we assume that they are all idiots, give them a break and remember that we, who are richly supplied with altogether too many calories in our diet still find occasions to complain, even about food. Just sit in on a meal with my children if you don’t believe me. In fact, just the other day I caught myself complaining about all the complaining my kids were doing.

Earlier within these notes we have noted the biblical concept that Jesus is talking about later in the Gospel lesson. The bread of life comes in us and that makes God in us. The language of the Christian is very incarnational and sacramental to describe the whole of life. Here we see this in the reaction of Moses. The people complain against Moses but he correctly notices that this is not against Moses or Aaron, they are nobodies. It is God who is in them and the complaint is borne by God.

Moses correctly identifies this as a relationship issue with God, this is a faith issue. They don't trust him. Now, if you think about this, Moses really is asking a great deal of trust of these folks. They can only gather enough for one day. I think I would go crazy knowing that I only had enough food in the house to feed my family for one day when I was out in a desert like that. A good father or mother would naturally want to save a little just in case a kid wakes up hungry in the middle of the night or the whole manna supply chain breaks down tomorrow morning. But even today, when there is no such restriction on how many groceries I can bring home from my weekly shopping trip, do we really do any better? Do I live my life in trust that God will take care of me or do I live my life out of a sense that I need to take care of myself because no one else is going to do it? Do I trust my bank account, my expertise, my acumen to make sure my family and I are fed? Or do I trust that God will make sure that happens? This is truly a first commandment sort of pericope.

Moses is asking the people to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. If they don't they will have to run back to Egypt. If they fear, love, and trust in God they will get up in the morning, walk out there and trust that when the dew evaporates there will be bread on the ground for them to eat. That is the test God is talking about here.

God hears the grumbling and responds, he sends quail and manna, he feeds his people, he sustains their life. They will not die in the wilderness as ought to have been the case. Garrison Keillor once said that in Minnesota you really lived because a couple times every winter, usually in January or February, Mother Nature makes a serious attempt to kill you.

God's work here has a pedagogical purpose. He wants them to know that it was he who liberated them from their slavery. The gift of the nourishment is tied to the gift of their freedom itself. That is a connection we cannot ignore. When my life gets tough, I pray. But what about those moments when my life is going along rather swimmingly. Do I pray and attend to God then too? Or am I apt to forget about him? God is not just addressing my cancer, my hunger or some other problem for which I pray, but he connects that help to the very salvation which Christ as worked in the cross when he liberated us from sin and death and devil. He is not only defeating the enemy's manifestation in this moment but he is concerned with the healthy and problem-free moments as well. They are all his moments.

You might also want to note that the glory of the Lord appeared and God spoke a word of nurturing and grace from that cloud. My Old Testament professor, George Heider, used to say that this glory of the Lord was what boiled off of God when he made himself locally present. Of course, the faithful reader will immediately recognize it as the same manifestation of God's presence which was noted at the birth of Jesus in Luke's account. The glory of the Lord shone around the angels and shepherds. It also showed up when Solomon consecrated the temple.

The main theme here, and the reason we get this reading today is that God has a long history of feeding people. The image of God as a provider of sustenance is ancient, not only as a metaphor but also as a reality. Indeed, it is one of the fundamental signs of the broken sinfulness of the

world that we must work hard for our daily bread and eat by the sweat of our brow. It was not supposed to be this way. The essential relationship into which we have been created involved us joyfully receiving this sustenance from God as a gift. Our food was never to have been purchased with money we called our “living” which we “earn.” It was always a gift.

This might also be a time to remind folks that God is still feeding people, and he is using his preferred means to do it, you! If you are hungry in your community, one of the best places to find a meal will likely have a cross on top of the building somewhere. Christians are very active in the field of feeding hungry people. Do you participate in a local food bank, soup kitchen, homeless shelter? The same God who fed the people of Israel and the multitudes in the wilderness is at work through you!

A tired trope: We often like to ding the Israelites for their lack of faith. This happens but a month or so after they have witnessed God defeating the Egyptian gods through the plagues, parting the Red Sea, and destroying Pharaoh’s army. And yet here they are complaining. This makes such an easy target for the preacher, but be careful here. Hunger is a powerful force in our lives. The fear of hunger, the pain of hunger makes us forget everything else. In the hierarchy of needs, hunger is right there – a powerful motivator that can even overcome what seems like common sense. Would we really have done any better? Our interior focus, our self-interest has blinded us to God. This is a damning reality about all of us, church goers and pagans alike. These are the children of Israel, not the Midianites or some other uncircumcised lot. They grumbled. We grumble.

Psalm 145:10-21

⁸ *The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

⁹ *The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.*

¹⁰ *All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,
and all your saints shall bless you!*

¹¹ *They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom
and tell of your power,*

¹² *to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.*

¹³ *Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.*

[The LORD is faithful in all his words
and kind in all his works.]

¹⁴ *The LORD upholds all who are falling*

- and raises up all who are bowed down.
- ¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
- ¹⁶ You open your hand;
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.
- ¹⁷ The LORD is righteous in all his ways
and kind in all his works.
- ¹⁸ The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.
- ¹⁹ He fulfills the desire of those who fear him;
he also hears their cry and saves them.
- ²⁰ The LORD preserves all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.
- ²¹ My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,
and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.

If you are wondering about the brackets around the second half of verse 15, it is one of the moments in the OT in which textual criticism shows up. Normally the OT is the Masoretic text (MT) which was used by the Jewish community. Our exemplar document comes from the Middle Ages. Jews did not preserve ancient manuscripts but each community copied their old, worn-out text, checked it for accuracy several times and reverently destroyed the old copy. It was a remarkably stable system, but the result is that we don't have many ancient copies of the OT like we have of the NT. The Dead Sea scrolls changed that and this is one of the moments in which it matters. One ancient Hebrew manuscript as well as the ancient translations of the Psalms into Greek and Syriac include the second part of verse 15. The MT does not. Should it be there? Most scholars think so. The brackets are there to remind us that the MT does not have it.

Many who pray a table prayer will preface the petition of the prayer with the statement from this psalm in verses 15 and 16. The Psalm is set in a narrative of sorts. The Psalmist is recounting all the reasons he is praising God in this Psalm. The picture here is what should be coming out of the mouths of the Israelites and us.

The preacher who is interested in the First Commandment approach to the OT lesson may well want to preach this psalm. It runs counter to the culture in which we live and may make a productive preaching opportunity. Our culture assumes basic human competency. Indeed, those who argue about the license to abort a child sometimes suggest that until a child is viable, competent to live outside the womb, it is not yet a person. If competency is the measure of our humanity, who is human? What does that say about the old man or woman in the Alzheimer unit at the local nursing home?

The psalmist assumes we are all dependent upon God. Luther said that our God was that person or thing which we believed would do us the greatest good. American culture assumes that entity

is the self and we have become self-idolatrous as a result. Many a crusty old Lutheran I have encountered in my parish ministry refused to accept that they were dependent on anyone, even God. It often kept them from accepting the help God offered them through their own fellow parishioners.

The other problem with self-sufficiency is that it forgets vs 18-20. God is near to all who call upon him. We imagine a distant and disinterested God. He is only paying attention, it seems when I do something very bad or very good. But the truth is that God is near always. Remember last week he got into the boat with those disciples. Christianity has it both ways in this regard, a healthy tension which we need to maintain. The transcendent God who is ineffably sublime is also right here in the room with me. Quite often this presence has skin as he comes to me in the love of my fellow Christian shown to me. Jesus' incarnation could be preached out of this verse.

Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism,⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.⁸ Therefore it says,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”

⁹ (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Is Paul here speaking toward the life which Jesus gives us in the Gospel lesson? He speaks of a body, a body which needs to be fed, a body which feeds on the bread of life that is Jesus. Does the nutrient that is Christ actually empower the humility, gentleness, patience and love which are the key elements to the peace and unity which are the main thrust of this passage? There are many ways to connect this passage to the Gospel reading, is this perhaps one that has homiletical legs to run on?

This section of Ephesians, technically part of the paraenesis or exhortation, is the reason this letter is often called the letter of the Church. Paul has spoken of the transformation and what that means for the relationship between Jew and Gentile. In chapter two the real unity is described and in chapter three the empowerment of that unity is described.

If we are correct and this letter is Paul's capstone letter which summarizes his ministry, this section is really important. This is Paul's vision, inspired by the Spirit, of what the Church really looks like. This becomes much more authoritative than simply a description of the way that the early church did things, or even a letter like Corinthians which seems to be so focused on some rather specific problems in Corinth. We can pull great principles from Corinthians, but do we really have a lot of folks who are not letting their daughters get married because they understand the end is near? The letter to Ephesians may be more authoritative than Corinthians in that it is not dealing with a specific problem but articulating the Apostle's vision for what all churches everywhere look like.

Paul ranges into the reality of what Christ has done for the Christian life. Paul is normally reticent about saying too much in these instances, lest he simply make another law for us to follow. He seems more willing to tell us what not to do. "Don't unite yourself to a prostitute!" He is less eager to tell us what we should do in specific language "A man should love his wife." But what does that exactly look like? He doesn't usually do that and likewise here there is not a great deal of specificity, but this is about as specific as it gets. He speaks much more specifically about the attitudes of the heart, the inner human being. It seems he will not prescribe a certain action, but he will say every action must come from love, humility, gentleness, etc.

The appeal for the Christian life comes out of the calling which God has creatively made in his Word. He calls us, he defines us, and he causes it to be. The life is defined in terms of principles and not specific sorts of actions. He is not creating a new law here, but describing something that might look very different from generation to generation, from village to village, even situation to situation, but these principles tie them together. The question is not whether we have followed the specific rule which governs this situation but whether our actions are gentle, kind, and loving.

All of this is part of unity. That is the overarching piece to this. We can follow the rules and be divisive you see, just attend a synodical convention if you want an example of that. Too often we find there are lots of rules which are followed with the seeming intent to divide us and exercise power over each other.

Then look to the next section, the purpose of this whole thing, this church, is nurturing. The offices, the roles, the people are not pastors, teachers, apostles, etc, to hold an office, but for the sake of people. Notice how the maturation and blessing of people occupies the center of this structure. It is not about the preacher, but about the hearer, it is not about the teacher, but the learner. The goal is the building up of the body of Christ, the people of God.

And then notice that this is doctrinal. We are working toward a goal where we have enough gravitas, enough experience and salt that when someone says something different to us we are not shaken by it. Thus, if someone comes and says something wild or at least that sounds wild to me, I either will recognize it as an error and not be led astray, or I will see that it is not an error but simply another way of speaking the truth and I will not be upset but rejoice in it, despite the differences. That is a very difficult discernment to make sometimes.

Which of these errors do you think is the bigger problem among us? Do we get upset when we should not or do we fail to recognize the error when we should? I would imagine that there is a great deal of both going on.

John 6:22-35

²² On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. ²³ Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?” ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

This passage fits into a context and the wise preacher will keep this in mind. For the past two weeks we have heard Mark’s version of the feeding of the multitudes and Jesus walking on the water. John has recounted the same events but in a slightly different way, with different emphases. John, for instance, tells us that the five loaves and two fish were actually the offering of a little boy who gave them to the disciples. Mark makes no mention of that. I would encourage you to read the first part of this chapter in preparation for reading this lesson and especially for preaching on this lesson.

This also falls within a following context. When Jesus says this, the crowds, especially the Pharisees, will become very angry. We will get some of that context over the next two weeks as we spend much of August in John 6. The angry response might occasion a question of our own. Can we assert Jesus, the truth about Jesus, in such a way that we shock and anger our audience? Should we be able to? What if the response to our preaching is a lethargic checking of the watch?

The people ask the question of Jesus “what should we do?” Jesus seems to direct this back to God’s deeds, but doesn’t he also speak of what it is that God does through and with us? Doesn’t God give us a life in this, a life which might be lived? When we assert that Jesus is the bread of life, do we not also then say that he empowers the Christian life, supplies the calories which allow the forgiver to forgive, the human to love, the leader to lead, etc. Does not this feeding have purpose? Is this the connection to the Epistle which we noted above?

Jesus said the bread of God is he who came down from heaven to give life to the world. Today we see the crowds rushing after Jesus and he very clearly says that this is not about feeding bellies alone, but it is about feeding the whole person, the bread which lasts for eternal life. This is about Jesus himself.

This is why Luther would say that this passage with all its eating and consuming language is not actually about the Lord’s Supper. Rather, in his estimation, the Lord’s Supper is about this chapter of John and its assertion about Jesus. If we make this about the sacrament we have limited this chapter in a way which does not allow it to speak to us in its fullness. What is more, the Sacrament of the Altar also is enriched by considering this claim about Jesus to be the substance of that supper.

Jesus is the bread of life. What does it mean to call him that? If you have been to a church camp in the last 100 years you probably sang “I am the bread of life...” perhaps you still do in church. But what does it mean to call him that? Considering the next couple of weeks are on this topic, we really ought to break this up a little bit. Next week we will hear Jesus assert that this is a matter of God’s fellowship with us. Let’s keep that fellowship and food issue until then.

The following week Jesus will assert that whoever eats this flesh and drinks this blood will rise on the last day to eternal life, so let’s leave the party or celebration theme for that week.

This week, it seems Jesus is talking about food which sustains us. (This is not absent from the following weeks either) Jesus is clear here that this is not really about physical eating, but eating is a metaphor for the faith relationship in which God saves us. This is why many theologians, including Dr. Luther, say that this chapter is not really about the Lord’s Supper as I mentioned above. I think the preacher who doesn’t connect this to the Lord’s Supper, however, is a little daft. For many of our parishioners this just sounds so sacramental, go with it. What is more, it seems to me that the Lord’s Supper is simply the actualization of this metaphor, so I am not sure what the problem is here. Yes, I know that if you push the Lord’s Supper theme too far you can

get some goofy ideas, but then again if you take just about any scriptural passage too far you get to some goofy ideas. If we remember that the Lord's Supper is about this chapter's assertion about Christ, not the other way around, I think we will keep it straight.

If we just use this as a sacramental text, I think we are missing the point. Rather, I think we will want to make the sacrament into a faith event. Jesus is truly talking about faith here. The people chase Jesus down and ask for a sign. "Moses gave us bread in the wilderness" they assert, but wait a minute, did not Jesus just do that and more. In fact there is a critical difference between Moses and Jesus. Moses prayed to God and God provided the gift. Jesus gave the bread and made it enough. Clearly in the comparison, John wants you see that Jesus is greater than Moses in this. Unlike Moses, he did not need to kick the problem upstairs for a solution. He provided it himself. But they don't see it. It is right there in front of their face and they don't see it. They ask for a sign when the neon letters are written huge and turned on full blast right in front of them.

They lack faith. Without that relationship with God in which he is Savior and giver of life itself, Jesus just doesn't make sense. You can see miracle after miracle and not get it. We often think that miracles will prove the veracity of our faith. They don't work that way. Blessed are those who don't see and yet believe, said Jesus, (John 20). That is the far greater thing than the seeing of miracles. The preacher will want to note that the people of ancient Galilee who did not get it were not that different from us. We would not likely have made this connection either. This takes the Holy Spirit of God. Our blessing is not a greater innate spiritual competence than Thomas or the people of these days. Our greater spiritual competence is a gift, a Pentecost/Baptismal gift.

We are the same sinners they were. John is speaking to the work which Christ does to us and through us in this dynamic and powerful relationship we have labeled faith. Jesus' work therein is as essential as the very bread we eat, it gives life itself. But again we must ask, how does it do that? What do we assert is going on here? I think this is really much more metaphysical than we give it credit.

One could simply talk about this in terms of power, power to live. In one of my favorite analogies I once heard that the fall into Sin had effectively cut us off from the power supply. Like one of those huge urns of coffee which you find in church basement kitchens, we are unplugged. The heat is retained for some time, probably long enough to make it through the coffee hour after church, but eventually it achieves ambient temperature and it is time to throw it out before the really penny-pinching old ladies find it and try to re-heat and re-use it.

Unplugged from God by sin, we grow colder and weaker and finally we die. We cannot sustain this life. There is some residual heat, we don't just expire on the day of our birth, there are some good moments in there, but eventually the juice runs out. Jesus, through his death, resurrection and outpouring of the Holy Spirit has reconnected us to God. Life flows into us once more. The connection of which we are speaking, the power cord, is faith. That is important. Faith doesn't actually save us, God does the saving, but he does it through faith. In this way we avoid the

tendency, so strong in America, to turn our faith into another idol, a good work to which God must somehow react by rescuing us from our enemies.

Another illustration I like for this is the idea of a radio's antenna. A radio without an antenna of any kind can be surrounded by signal but can make no music. It has no way to "capture" the signal and turn it into the sound waves which we seek from our radio. With an antenna, however, we get the music. If you think of the music as the christian life and faith as the antenna, faith is necessary, without it, all the love from God does not connect to us, even though we are surrounded by it. But remember, the antenna actually creates no music. If you think about it, an antennae is just an inert hunk of metal hanging out there. A coat hanger might do in a pinch. Faith does not really save us, it is necessary, but it does not save us. Jesus does that. It doesn't take great faith, a mustard seed amount will do. God can move a mountain through that tiny faith.

Jesus says he is the bread of heaven, the life giving sustenance for the human being. But the apprehension of that life is not via the eating and chewing of something but through the relationship of faith. it is in faith that the sacrament of the altar becomes life giving, it is by bestowing faith that baptism is the same thing, and likewise that the word we hear is not just some guy up there reading the bible or preaching to me but it becomes the very voice of Jesus, calling me to newness of life.

Of course the whole discussion of faith runs the risk of becoming nothing more than navel gazing, and if it takes its eyes off of Jesus so it can look in the dark corners of my heart for some faith, then it is a misguided quest. But that is not really what I am talking about. This is a sermon which is really about being, being a Child of God, because he has made you one. It is not a doing thing, not a search or a quest or even an openness to God. It is about being what he has called us to be, what he has created us to be.

Law

1. I am dying – like a starving man with no food in sight, my life draws inexorably to an ending. I can take my vitamins, do my exercises, and die anyway. I cannot escape it.
2. The death of my physical body is not the half of it. There is a Spiritual death as well, a death which leaves me empty and cold even now. The next phase of my existence is not necessarily bright; indeed it might be very dark and cold indeed.
3. I cannot get my own house in order. I cannot arrest or even slow this process in any meaningful way. Science offers me no hope, it doesn't even acknowledge that there is a spiritual problem with me because it cannot find an instrument to measure it. Perhaps it really is a chemical imbalance in my head, perhaps religion is just a vestigial phantom of the pre-evolved mind. Great, now my feelings are just my inner chimp coming out. That helps.

4. If Christ is the real life, what hope do I have of connecting to him? He lived and died and rose up to heaven a long time ago. I look at this miserable church that is left and I see a bunch of people just as broken as I am and who are no better off than I am. Do I really think I will find answers there?
5. Even as a Christian, I cannot say that these doubts are beyond me or that I am not afflicted with them. They can still torment me. What if I am just kidding myself here? What if this whole religion thing is the “opiate” which tricks me into getting out of bed every morning?

Gospel

1. Jesus is the bread of life – he has come to save this world because it is dying. My death is not an obstacle for him. He raises dead people. It is his job description.
2. The promise he makes is that his gift is not only for this life and today, but more importantly, more significantly it is for all the days, for an eternity. I am not a phantom briefly seen, but a creature of God, precious to the eternal Lord of heaven and earth and he has worked mightily and effected salvation for me.
3. This is not about my incompetence but his competence. Of course I am broken, it is the way I was born, but he is not broken. The same Jesus who fed the multitudes and who rose from the dead has looked me in the eye in the waters of my baptism and come to me time and again. He likes me, he loves me, he gives me what I need, and he carries me in the day of my doubt.
4. He loves to work through the broken and the weak things of this world. He died a slavish death upon a cross, cruelly treated by the hands of men whom he had created. Look not for his strength in displays of power, look for it in the good despite me and despite you. Look for fatherly power to be shown in mercy.
5. That opens a door for doubt, it is true, he knows it, he does not tell fearful disciples as he walks across that sea that he is done with knuckle heads and he will be replacing them with more spiritual sorts of people. He climbs in. The crowds that look for a sign are patiently taught. Even the dunderhead Peter, by the end of this chapter makes a beautiful confess which we can share and even sing. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life?”

Sermon Ideas

1. “I am the bread of life” (OT and Gospel: That the Spirit of God move the hearer to rely upon Jesus who has answered all of life’s most difficult questions – he is the bread of life itself)

Bread feeds us so we can live, and the lack of bread (food) means we perish. Jesus is that sort of important to us. Trusting in God gives us manna to live by. Failure to trust in God forces us back into Egypt's slavery.

The people of Israel wandering out in the desert of Sinai think they have a bread problem, their food supplies are running short and they wonder if God has not brought them out into the wilderness to kill them. Not that he needed to do that with the Egyptians more than willing to lend a hand a few chapters before. What they don't realize is that they don't really have a bread problem, they have a God problem; they have a faith problem. God could have simply left them to starve, or worse, he could have given them food and left them alone, but he doesn't. He gives them the manna which feeds their faith. They must trust him every morning when they walk out into the desert to collect their Manna. They must trust him double on the Sabbath that the Manna which spoils every other day of the week, will not spoil Friday night. God really wants this relationship.

The people of Jesus day were also theologically a little thick about this. They read their Bibles, knew the stories of those fools in the desert long ago and were pretty sure that they would never make the same mistake. But Jesus has just fed the thousands and they cannot see the sign which is right before their eyes. They wonder what sign Jesus will do so they can trust/rely/believe in him. But He has already done it. Their eyes are closed despite their Biblical knowledge.

Are our eyes any more open today? Do we not trust/rely on ourselves, imagining that our bank accounts, homes, and pension plans will take care of us, or we fret because we wonder if they will take care of us? But God has already promised us his eternal love.

Jesus comes to us today and declares that better than Manna; he is the bread from heaven, sent by the Father to be the answer to our life and its problems. Today, he comes to feed us with himself, and that means giving us **his** very faith today. Today and ever since the day of our baptism and every time he has spoken to us in his word, he has been incorporating us into the relationship which Jesus has with his Father. We are given a perfect faith relationship with God by a holy gift. This is not something we gin up by the dint of our effort, it is a pure and holy gift of God.

Jesus lays a terrible burden on the people if you do not see it this way. "Just believe in God!" he says. But who can so focus their mind or somehow strive so as to believe in God? That is impossible for me to accomplish. The only way I can believe is if God establishes the relationship with me. He must call that into being. Jesus gives me his own faith that prayed, called upon God, entrusted himself to God's hands when he died, and which received resurrection.

We often forget, I think, just how terrible this admonition is which Jesus speaks. If He doesn't give this gift of faith, we are doomed. Our enemy is always ready to pounce on us

if we trust a faith which we have made. He will tell us that we are faith-failures. Those guys of there are the real Christians and I am a failure. But faith, real faith, is able to withstand this temptation because it knows that it is a work of God himself, not of my own sinful frailty. This is when it is really good to be a Lutheran at a baptism.

Through that dynamic relationship we call faith, God gives us life itself, a life to be lived. All my needs are really met in him. I must let go of knowing exactly what that means. He is the creator, he is the redeemer, and he is ultimately the one who has those answers in his hands. That is very hard to do, but now, in his hands, I am in a perfect place. He has me in his hands and I am perfectly safe, perfectly under his care. I may be hungry, I may be suffering, but I can be with Paul content in this situation. I am with Jesus, Jesus is with me. If I have Jesus, I have everything. I don't need anything else. This is not just a Pollyanna sort of thinking. This is a real way of life, confident and bold. It is not some passive "roll-over and pretend it doesn't matter" sort of life, but a life which engages in real ministry because the outcome, the success, the final goal, that is all his, not mine.

2. The Bread that Binds us Together (Gospel and Epistle: That Jesus and His Spirit would unite the hearer to the whole body of Christ through his presence at the feast)

Food is one of the amazing things that binds us together. Our families gather around thanksgiving, wedding, anniversary, or any family dinners. We get together and pull out the best china, we go to the local bakery and buy the beautiful bread. We make the favorite dishes and share the old memories and make some new ones. It is almost impossible to sit down to such a meal and remain angry with the people who are across the table from us. They might still be the annoying uncle with poor table manners or the propensity to tell the same stories over and over, but they are our uncle and we are at our table together.

We are united when we eat together. We are so used to holding that wafer in our hand and believing that this is the forgiveness pill, but Jesus wants to give us so much more than that, as marvelous as the forgiveness is. He wants to make our lives beautiful and loving and full of fellowship and family bonds. He would with this take away the things that divide us, which weigh us down and make us grumpy and crabby. He would fill our hearts with holy joy. Jesus wants us to look at the person sitting next to us and be ecstatic that they are right there beside us. Just like when we are with our family and that cousin has come from across the country just to be with us. How often don't we get together to celebrate a birthday or an anniversary with a meal? We long for these times, just a time of being together. Jesus in this meal comes to us today to bring us this real gift, it is salutary, healthy that he is here, he is healing the old wounds, and making us stronger.

If you want a great story and have not already done so, watch "Babette's Feast." This movie is really about unity in food. It even has Lutherans in it.

The law of this sermon is the disunity, the friction, the fractiousness, and the enmity which so often pervades in our lives. Our sinful self assumes we solve the problem ourselves. Jesus comes with the good news that he is the unity, the bread which ties us together.

3. He is always near (Psalm, OT, and Gospel lessons – that the Holy Spirit would open the eyes of the hearer to see God’s pervasive and gracious presence in all of life.

This sermon wants to take on the prevailing cultural view that God is distant and we are the masters of the world in which we live. The old man will find this notion terrifying, but the regenerate man, the new man whom God has raised up in Baptism will rejoice at the presence of God so near to us.

There is a healthy tension to be maintained here. God is transcendent. He is not our friend, but almighty and utterly sublime. At the same time, in Christ, he has become human, run the human race, and delights to be present in our lives. We don’t preach one side of that truth without positing the opposing tension. It is from that tension that the homiletical impetus comes. The transcendent God really doesn’t need a preacher. Nor does the wholly immanent God. The one who is with us is also the one who is completely unlike us needs some preaching. That means his presence is not just a nice thought, it is life itself.

The Israelites were called to lives of radical trust. God had to show up every morning to make this bread thing work. Jesus connects himself explicitly to this event from the OT. It was not Moses who gave them bread, it was Jesus’ Father, and by extrapolation, it was Jesus himself who gave the Manna and multiplied the loaves.

But it is the psalmist who expresses this best. The whole creation, including my humble life, praises God for his generosity and kindness. He opens his hands and all creation is fed. The psalmist is claiming that the food in the grocery store which I buy is connected to God. The farmer is but a servant. The grocer is a vendor. God is the supplier. The same applies across the board for our lives. God hears the prayers of his people, he is present.

The important key to all this is Jesus. He has taken up our human life, and our human death upon a cross. That makes our lives, by their connection to his life, beautifully important. As I write these words today, it is raining. The scientist will tell me that this is a result of natural processes of evaporation, weather, condensation, and precipitation. All that is true, but when I think of the men fighting wildfires or the farmers whose crops depend on this rain, I praise God for creating this system which delivers rain to me, and praise him for the continued governance of that system. I rejoice that the one who is pulling the levers has holes in his hands a feet where he died for me. I count on that love behind the power of the world. I cannot say that I always understand or can even perceive the love of God in what happens. Californians who are in the midst of a terrible drought

might wonder why he has blessed the Midwest with too much water left them dry. But I know it is not because he is far away and inattentive. I know if it not because he has set up a system which I have broken and am now living with the consequences of my own foolish action. I am in God's hands. He is always near to hear those who cry out to him.

My live is lived in that quiet and sturdy confidence. The God who came to die for me is the same God who attends me now.

4. Walking the life worthy of the calling we have received (Epistle: That the hearer would hear God's creative call to a new life which is empowered by Spirit and emboldened by God's mighty deeds.)

Paul speaks of the Church today, the Church in all that it is supposed to be. This is not a distant dream or a reality which obtained long ago in some miraculous time, but a reality for this day which God's Holy Spirit works even now and would work in us as well. This sermon is intended for the congregation which has lost the vision of what it means to be the Church. This congregation imagines that it is here to preserve a heritage, save a building, be a social club, anything other than the missional outpost God created it to be. Paul gives us four things to think about ourselves and our congregation and to act upon:

- a. humility – puts Jesus and the other at the center of our universe, it is not all about me.
- b. gentleness – Always is looking out for the other guy or gal. It doesn't run roughshod over the feelings or life of another. It cares about them.
- c. Patience – This won't always go as quickly as I like it to go. People are funny that way. We need to let this happen on God's time.
- d. bearing with one another in love, - People need to be born with. We are sinners, Paul is not suggesting otherwise. The real Christian congregation is not shocked to discover that Jesus has called sinners to his side again. He has always done that and this means we must love the unloveable types. Jesus empowers this.

All of this is then put into a goal – we are “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Paul does not give us hard guidelines to describe what this looks like for our congregation, but he is pretty sure that the folks in the parishes to which he wrote would recognize it. This was countercultural in his day and in ours. Romans thought humility was for sissies, gentleness was womanly, patience for bumpkins. You did not bear with others, you conquered them! The Roman Empire was united under the firm grip of the emperors, enforced by legionaries, overseen by a vast bureaucracy of imperial functionaries.

Today, however, the call of Paul is just as countercultural. Our lives are defined by the things we have and the comparisons we draw with our neighbors. Our heroes are the athletes who stomp on their competitors, but not so often the compassionate one who stops to help her adversary finish the race. We have forgotten how to bear with one another in gentleness, and thus the unity of the Spirit, the bond of peace is lost among us.

God defines us differently. He creates us differently. We are humble and gentle. That means we put the other first. We are patient in our suffering, even when it hurts, especially when it hurts. We bear with one another in love. Voter's meetings are not like business meetings. Worship is not about whose music is played and whose is not. Our fellowship is marked by a different spirit than that of the world.

The preacher will want to be careful not to become a moralizer here. Describe, do not prescribe. Use the present indicative tense in your verbs, avoid the "should, ought, must" language of the moralist. Remember this is God at work among us, not the individuals exercising their will to be better folks.

Some other ideas we might develop

5. The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. (that the hearer would be connected to God in Christ)
6. Growing to maturity in Christ (That the hearer would better understand and delight in the mission of the Church to bring him/her to maturity)