

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 12 (Proper 14)

In the middle of Ephesians 3, Paul reflects that his own ministry to effect a unity between Jew and Gentile is a witness to heavenly authorities and powers. Here's the quote in a little context:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (Eph 3:8-10)



That is a really different take on the mission of the Church, isn't it? Have you ever thought that what God is doing in your parish is actually a message to rulers and authorities in heavenly places? Do you imagine that they are looking at you as a witness to them? Do those heavenly beings who govern the galaxies of God's creation and keep planets in their courses look to my little parish and marvel that God has gathered us together? Does that make going to church on Sunday a little different?

I wonder sometimes if modernity has not so understood everything that we have lost the fulsomeness of God's work. Yes, it only takes a drop of water to effect a baptism, so we only splash a little. It is not the bread or the wine that makes the sacrament so we use something that barely qualifies for bread and sip a bit of wine that no one would actually drink at their dinner tables. Christ

has become the remover of our naughtiness and we really don't think of him as the secret to the power of the universe nor do we consider his death a cosmically significant event. Do we imagine thrones and authorities in the heavens looking down at us in worship and marveling at what God has done? We cannot seem to garner the attention of the thousands who stream past our buildings in their air-conditioned SUV's. Perhaps if we remembered that the thrones and authorities are watching us in wonder we might be more attractive to the humbler denizens of earthly domains. As it is, we have marketed ourselves to the point that we look more like McDonald's hawking hamburgers than the place where you might find the very bread of life.

Today, Jesus, in the Gospel according to John, asks us to think cosmically. Such thinking does not necessarily mean you have to put on the tie-dyed shirt and a headband and talk like someone at a Grateful Dead concert. God's Christian people have been talking cosmically for centuries. There is a strong mystic and contemplative tradition. Luther loved the work of Meister Eckhart and others who came from the mystical tradition of medieval Christianity. The Cappadocians and Athanasius are another source. Jesus is life itself. He is our joy, our peace, our hope, our bread, our power, our love, and our everything. He is the unified field theory, the holy grail of physics.

Jesus is the bread of life. Kick back and just think about that for a little while. But don't get so lost you forget to write a sermon!

Collect of the Day

Gracious Father, Your blessed Son came down from heaven to be the true bread that gives life to the world. Grant that Christ, the bread of life, may live in us and we in Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

What is the true bread? And as soon as one brings up the idea of a true bread, doesn't that assume a false bread as well? What is that? Is the false bread anything that would purport to be the answer to the big questions of life? That can be doctrinal or simply money or something like that in which we would trust. The true bread is of course Jesus. But what makes him the true bread? The preacher will want to be able to answer that question.

Can we contrast the life giving bread to the bread that merely feeds the dying life. Is the life giving bread the bread which is the flesh of Jesus and that which he did in the flesh? Remember this is not about the Lord's Supper; rather, the Lord's Supper is about this reality, that Jesus is the life giving bread which saves the world. Is then the Lord's Supper really about the Incarnation? In a very real sense, yes! The Lord's Supper is not the totality of the Incarnation event, but it is meaningless without incarnation.

We also might consider that we tend to think of spiritual and physical as separate things. But in the Hebrew mindset in which both Jesus and John live the spiritual and the physical are the same thing or at least the physical can be very spiritual. The opposite of spiritual is not physical, it is worldly.

Gracious Father – he gives us of himself. What father is not gracious? One has to be a giving sort of person to become a father, really, a real father, but even the contributor of genetic material when any woman gets pregnant is giving something. Real fathers go on giving, for years and years. It is just the way of it. They estimate the cost of raising a child at some number so high I don't even want to think about it. According to an article I read in the Huffington Post, it averages \$235,000 for a middle income household.

The Father in heaven gave his blessed and only Son so that he might be the true bread that gives life to the world. God's giving was the very thing which we lacked. God's creation has begun a terrible deathward spiral on that day in which our first parents sinned in the garden. It would take millennia, might still take millennia, but there are a lot of problems in this world and honestly we are not solving them. We can at best put a bandage on them, create some temporary fix for the problem, but we cannot really address the root of the problem. That is simply beyond us. We cannot be nor make the true bread that really gives life to this old and dying world. All we can do is carve out a little life for ourselves before our own flame goes out. If I am lucky, I might pass a little on to my children but I cannot even guarantee that we will be able to pass that along or that it will be enough.

The prayer makes a critical assumption which will not surprise us but needs to be stated in this culture. The true life which the world needs must come from outside of us. It did come on a

terrible day we strangely call “good” when the righteous and innocent Son of God freely gave his life on a cross for the sins of this dark and dying world. It was done through the savage and brutal act of a crucifixion, unjustly applied, a low point in the history of the world, the darkest of days, yet it really was “Good Friday.”

That Christ who is the bread of life has changed everything with his death and resurrection. Now there is life, a true life, that does not die, that does not hunger and thirst, a life which comes from God, the author and source of all life. That life is apprehended through faith, the relationship established by the Holy Spirit and lived through Christ.

But there is a terrible reality about this true bread from heaven, a reality which we continue to see and lament to this day. The old and dying world did not simply pass away on that day when Christ made everything new with Easter light. It clings tenaciously to its dying and we with all creation pine for the day when God reveals for every eye to see the wonder of his new creation (Romans 8). Have you not ever seen the pictures of starving children in Africa or Bangladesh or some other impoverished place and side by side the pictures of the food aid which is sitting on the docks through the greed and corruption and cruelty of those in power? The dying of the world is most distressing.

They say that if we did not eat too much and if the systems were allowed to work, that there really is no reason that a child should go hungry tonight. It is not a lack of food, but a surfeit of sin that keeps them from a meal right now. In the same way the sacrifice of Christ upon that cross, the love of God for this world, is enough, enough for every lost and dying sinner. The father welcomes the prodigal home and goes out to urge the stubborn elder brother in. God loves every human, even the most broken of humans, even those whom the society labels monsters and who rot in our prisons awaiting only the day of their death. God loves them all.

Yet like starving children in sight of a pile of food, not everyone rests tonight in the comfort and the peace which is Christ. We pray in this prayer that God would feed us with the bread of life. We ask God to give again, so that He may live in us and we may live in the one who lives and reigns with the Father and the Spirit, one God. (Did you notice the way that prayer just melds into the doxology at the end of the prayer?)

God must overcome sin, greed, corruption, fear, and all sorts of negative things in order for this prayer to be granted. What will he accomplish in your life to feed you? What must he accomplish in another life to feed them? How will you be an instrument for his conquering sin, death, and devil to bring that other to the newness of life?

Jesus is the ultimate food aid to the dying world. Does he sit on the docks of churches today, waiting distribution to the hungry people who drive by those churches in their cars they cannot afford and with hearts that are broken? What will it take to get the food out of the dock and into the empty hands of the sinful, dying, and otherwise hopeless people of the world?

Perhaps the preacher needs to preach about life. What is this life that Jesus gives? He gives the whole loaf. He doesn't just give us a slice of bread, but the whole loaf. We often ask a person we meet what they do for a living and we mean their job. But is our job and the money we earn really our living? What would folks say if the next time we were asked that question we responded with, "I'm a human and a sinner. I die and Jesus makes me alive. I guess that's what I do for a 'living.'" ? Of course, most people would be looking for the nearest exit if we were to say that, but do we need to stop caring about that? Do we need to think about this? It seems so. The whole life, relationships, emotional, economic, all sorts of ways. Jesus gives the whole life.

Readings

I Kings 19:1-8

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."³ Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers."⁵ And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat."⁶ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again.

⁷ And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you."⁸ And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

In a strange turn of events, Elijah, who has just challenged and defeated the prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel, receives word that Queen Jezebel is going to do him what he did to them. Remember Elijah had them all put to the sword and killed something like 850 of the prophets of Asherah and Baal that day. It seems odd to us that Elijah who had stared down hundreds of hostile prophets before a crowd of Israelites who were not necessarily on his side, now was sent into a tizzy by one woman with a crown and a grudge. But then again, as we have been noticing with the disciples in Mark, fear is not a rational thing. The disciples had Jesus in the boat and they were still afraid of the storm.

In his fear, Elijah heads south, toward the last outpost of the Israelite nation before the nasty desert of the Sinai, Beersheba. There he leaves his servant and he heads out a day's journey south. How far was it? Ten miles or twenty, perhaps more, but we don't know. There he lays down under a broom tree, these are really more of a bush than a tree, the sort of thing you might see growing beside the road on your vacation through Arizona or New Mexico this summer.

Elijah has had enough. He asks that he might die. I think that if Elijah were alive today we would have him on some sort of medication and declare him to bi-polar or manic-depressive. He went through these wild mood swings. This is not unusual with great people, by the way. Luther had these too. I wonder if genius and instability go hand in hand. I also wonder how many geniuses are not medicated into mediocrity by the pharmacological solutions we have imposed on them.

God does not answer this prayer of his servant, at least not yet. An angel comes and touches his shoulder and bids him to arise and eat. There he finds bread and water. He eats and lies back down but the angel again bids him eat and on the strength of that food he journeys forty days and nights to Horeb, the mountain of the Lord, also called Mt. Sinai, the very place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. This is the ultimate power bar, but apparently quantity is also required.

His fear and despair may well be worthy of our attention today. Elijah is being a foolish servant of God. He has seen great works, been part of them. Yet, he is discouraged and fearful. Are we the same sorts of foolish followers of God? God doesn't just throw up his hands at Elijah's foolishness. He cares for the servant. He feeds him and cares for him through this angel. Does the discouraged servant of God in this parish need to hear that God does see them in their discouragement and fear. Does the preacher point the hearer to God's offer of sustenance and strength for this journey we are on?

The preacher may have an entrance here. So often we think that God has abandoned us in our days of grief. Elijah wants to give up. We often seem to say that to be depressed or sad is somehow a sin. People of faith should be happy all the time. Yet, here we see Elijah in the pits of despair. He is ready to die. His great triumph seems to have failed. He has beaten the prophets of Baal in a head to head competition. But it did not seem to work. He is ready to hang it up. But the preacher may well want to notice that down there, in the low points, the same God who was there to deliver fire at the scene of his triumph on Mt Carmel is there with a bit of food and water under the broom tree of his despair.

Interestingly, Elijah takes 40 days to get to Horeb where he will be sustained by God himself. It is interesting that he does not get another power bar for the journey home, or at least no one mentions it. Does the food eaten under the broom tree last 80 days?

As the story continues, Elijah makes his complaint before God there, and God hears him, and provides for him three things, helps to do the job with him, a long trip, and a new view of things as God reassures him that his ministry is not a total failure, indeed, 7,000 have not kissed Baal in Israel and have not bent their knee to worship him and his foul consort Asherah.

This text which lies before us this week has us focus on the work of God to get Elijah to that place, feeding him. Elijah is depressed, he is afraid, he wants to die. God seems to come to him as the prototypical Lutheran mom and tells him to eat something, he will feel better with a little

casserole in him. God feeds him, and when he doesn't eat enough, he sends the angel back to get him to eat some more. Angels are food pushers.

But this also has theological significance for the reader of the Bible. Elijah is reliving the history of Israel here. Last Sunday we heard the story of how God fed the Israelites in the wilderness with manna and quail. They too were on the way to Horeb. Miraculously God saw them through the desert for forty years on this manna. Elijah would journey for forty days and nights, another penitential season, on his way back to the root and font of the Israelite faith and an encounter with God.

The Christian today is also fed by God, fed by the true bread which has come from heaven, the Son of God who has come into this world to be its light and its life. We are on a pilgrim's journey, a journey at the end of which we will behold God face to face as Elijah did amid the fractured rocks of Horeb. It is enough for the journey, God has seen to that. It is sufficient for the heat and drought which the enemy throws at us in this pilgrimage.

One might also look at another aspect of this story. Is the touching which the angel does a form of healing? The Angel of the Lord is often understood to be the pre-incarnate Christ. So often when Jesus touched in the NT it was to heal the person. Is Elijah's depression being addressed here? Does the LORD heal him of his fear, his phobia?

Psalm 34:1-8

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
² My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
³ Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!
⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.
⁵ Those who look to him are radiant,
and their faces shall never be ashamed.
⁶ This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him
and saved him out of all his troubles.
⁷ The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
⁸ Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
⁹ Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,
for those who fear him have no lack!

¹⁰ The young lions suffer want and hunger;
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

As you read this psalm, think of it as the words of Elijah after the events we read in I Kings today. Elijah was a “poor man” who “cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him.” The angel of the LORD did indeed encamp around Elijah and delivered him. Elijah quite literally tasted and saw that the Lord was good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in God!

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Paul has prayed that the Ephesians would have the Spirit and Christ dwelling within them. Last week we heard how that prayer results in a Church, a community, in which we bear patiently with one another, gently, lovingly, patiently forgiving. We were united into one body, under one Lord, through one baptism, so that we might be mature and no longer tossed about like infants on the waves of cunning and deceit from the world and our evil foe.

This week Paul exhorts the gentiles and, let’s admit it, that is us. We are called to a different sort of life than we used to know. We are to put on a new self, created in Christ to look like him, holy and righteous. While the love of God is not pre-conditional, he does not love us because we got it

right, his love is certainly post-conditional. His love does make us right and that rightness starts to show up in our lives.

It is easy for Paul speak of what we should not do. It gets a little tougher when he comes to the subject of what we should do. The thief should no longer steal, but should work. Paul will not tell him what work to do. Our anger should not lead us to sin, but notice this does not say we should not be angry. Our speech should not be destructive. I cannot but think of the coarse and demeaning speech which so typifies what we hear on television. When was the last time you heard a good and clean joke that did not laugh at someone?

Is grieving the Holy Spirit really simply not living up to the Love that God has put within us? Is this a catch all sort of term for anything that offends God's Spirit who dwells within us? I don't think that this is another part of the laundry list. I think this is the summary of all that, this then is followed by a couplet in vss. 32 and 33, laying the bad and good side by side to compare them.

This is a long list. One could find lots of things to talk about, but the end of this pericope seems most helpful. Paul exhorts us to be kind, gentle, tenderhearted, and forgiving of each other as Christ forgave us. This is all as children imitating their father, for God really is our father, and we have the joy of living up to the name which he has given us when he adopted us as sons. We walk in Christ, filled with his love. There is not a recipe for the Christian life, a roadmap which tells us what to do step by step. Christianity is not like following the instructions for putting together that furniture you buy at Ikea. The Christian life looks so different from person to person but it is marked by these four things: Kindness, gentleness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness. That is in our hearts and lives because Christ has put it there.

He talks interestingly about how we are to be imitators of the pattern of life which God has given us. This is a "now/not yet" tension for us, but one in which we healthily can live. This is not set before us as some unattainable goal which is designed to crush us. We are like little children who are imitating our father. We might be comical in that, but that is not the point. The point is that in love the child strives to be like "daddy."

The preacher who takes this up as a sermon text could preach a description of the Christian life. It is a necessary sermon to preach but it will have to be carefully done or it will sound too much like preaching in the negative sort of sense and that would miss entirely what Paul is trying to do. The preacher has to remember here that the law changes nothing. Making a diagnosis of a problem does not solve the problem. Telling a man his appendix is inflamed and about to burst will not help him unless you bring him to the surgeon who can perform the operation that will save his life. We like to think that telling people what to do is enough, they will "decide" to do it, use their willpower and amend their sinful ways. But as much as they may vow and desire to do just that, it is not yet a real change of the person. That takes God. He adopts, he gives the name, he makes us children of God, and he fills us with Christ and with his Love. He unites us with himself so that slowly, one day at a time, once cell at a time, one action at a time, his gracious love and peace can start to show forth in our lives. The real question is whom are imitating?

John 6:35-51

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. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

We were attracted to the idea that Jesus loses none of those whom the Father gives him. Two things might be considered here. First, God seems to have placed the whole creation under Christ’s governance – thus he has given him the whole world. This is not an exclusive category but an inclusive category. It includes everyone. God wants Jesus to save the whole world.

Secondly, this speaks to our fears and concerns. We often feel lost, but we are not lost. Jesus has never lost track of us. If our final end and happiness depend on our map reading skills, we are sunk. But Jesus never loses track of his sheep, even when they are befuddled, alone, wandering, or afraid. He has not lost them. Even when they have forgotten him and haven’t darkened the door of a church for decades. He has never lost them, never forgotten them, never given up on them. Here is a promise which is preach-able.

Fun sermon point: Jesus was born in Bethlehem – the “House of Bread” in Hebrew/Aramaic. Jesus stakes out a pretty dramatic claim for himself here. He is the solution to death itself. The fathers ate manna and died, Jesus is offering the bread for which humanity has hungered since it was evicted from the Garden of Eden, the life which has no end, the reality for which we were created but which we catastrophically lost in sin. His flesh, broken on a cross, will be the undoing of that reality and the ushering in of a new reality, a reality which we enjoy even now. In Eden they never had to work. They did not have to do anything to live – no weary days of

bearing burdens and attending endless meetings. It was life by grace! Jesus has restored us to that – we do nothing to gain or earn this life. It is gift or it is not ours. Yes, the old broken life still means we attend the meetings and work for our daily bread, but that too will come an end. We live now in the strange overlap time of our post-baptismal and pre-death state. Both are true of us – sinner and saint. Jesus is talking about the saint descriptors here.

I am wondering what Jesus means by “I will raise him up on the last day”? Is this more than resurrection? Is he talking about holding us up to God? Will he take us up in his hands and hold us up before the enormity of God and say, “This is mine!”?

This is a radical Jesus, the sort of Jesus who is not comfortable in Sunday School lessons. He is telling these people that their Jewishness is not really the news here. Their fathers ate manna and died. He is the news here, his physical presence; this carpenter from Nazareth is the answer to the world’s hunger, the cosmic solution. If you have ever read the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy, I assure the answer is not “42,” the answer is Jesus. The real issue might be whether we are we asking the questions that arrive at that answer?

John is addressing a Gnostic situation that is not so different from our situation. The Gnostics thought God was too transcendent to ever sully his purity with physical incarnation. Jesus may have looked like a human being, but that was an accommodation of our limited human understanding. Today we don’t say it quite the same way, but our culture says much the same thing. There is no God, at least not one we can measure in our laboratories and with our spectrometers. We admit that if there is a God, he is wholly other, or he isn’t really God. God is distant and far removed. Even if our congregations confess the incarnation on a weekly basis, their daily lives are often lived in a virtual Deistic Gnosticism. We confess the incarnation in the past tense, not the present tense, not in the active and living presence of Christ. He was there a long time ago, but he is not here, not really here, not touchable right now.

But what if he was here? What if he is here? How does that change this gathering on a Sunday morning, how does that change the way I might see the suffering and the joy around me? How does that change the way I am a father or a mother, a child or a citizen? What if Jesus is right here? This is not another version of “What would Jesus do?”? That question assumes that he is not doing and I need to. That question looks to my will and tries to conform it to the will of Jesus. But it is still my broken, sinful will we are talking about, a foolish foundation for faith. Jesus is not going there. Jesus is asserting something about himself right now. Just by being here, he renders what he touches holy and heavenly. Think of the leper he touched at the end of Mark 1 (or Elijah in the first lesson). If Jesus is in me, is not love itself in me? (see I John 4). If love itself has come to live in me, what will define my life? Can it not be love? The bracelet needs to read, “What is Jesus doing?”

Perhaps we need to remember the resurrected Jesus manifesting his physical nature, he eats, he drinks, he walks on the road with the disciples, etc. Jesus did not set aside his physical nature when he rose from the dead, but he kept the humanity he took up in Bethlehem’s manger and

Mary's womb. Today He is united with the physical creation, especially his humanity. Have you noticed that when he raises Jairus' daughter and Lazarus, he says, "give them something to eat." There is a connection between resurrection and food. Jesus is the bread of life. Is the bread of life casting his aroma into the world, the powerful aroma of fresh baked bread, the steak on the grill that draws us into the meal, into the feast which is the presence of God?

The challenge is that this is not a past tense reality. Jesus is not stale, day-old bread! The bread of life, the presence of Christ, the secret to the power of the universe, the key to cosmic harmony, the bread which satisfies the world's hunger, all that stuff, is right here. The thing the world longs for, is starving for, is present. Jesus is here. He is not far from us, he is not sitting on some heavenly throne looking down upon us from a great height, but he is present. He smiles at you in the face of that old woman in the pew next to you. He serves in the rough hands of the usher and elder who bring you to communion. He forgives you in the voice of the preacher who might be able to carry a tune.

In 1527 Luther and Zwingli met at Marburg for a colloquy to try and get the Protestants together in the face of an aggressive Holy Roman Empire which wanted to impose Catholicism on the nascent protestant lands. They agreed on almost all their points, but they stuck on the question of incarnation. Zwingli thought Jesus was in heaven, not on earth, Luther disagreed. When Zwingli asked where Luther thought Jesus went when he ascended, Luther responded "Into the cosmos." He seems to have thought that in the ascension, Christ did not leave earth and go to heaven, but he entered and united himself with the creation he had died to save. As Paul said in last week's epistle Jesus fills the entire universe.

When we turn our attention to the specifics of this text, there are a couple of interesting developments. First of all, against all those who would spiritualize Jesus into a nice warm fuzzy thing, John relates Jesus' words about his own flesh today. The real life is to be found in the consumption of Jesus' flesh. To the ancients and the contemporary, this was repulsive language and John delights in the effect. Jesus is being gross. The vocabulary is graphic.

Only God can overcome the problem here. You cannot come to God of your own volition and effort, only those whom the Father has drawn. The implications of what Jesus says are simply too great. God in the flesh is not a simple or an easy thing. Which brings us of course to the second point of all this, the point I actually brought up earlier. The food sitting on the docks while the children starve will be distributed by God. This is a divine action, this is the mystery of the seed sown that grows simply because God has given it the mysterious "magic" to grow. It does not happen because the farmer gives it this power, but because God has given it this power.

This discourse of Jesus in John 6 is pivotal to the whole book in that it furthers both the tension which will result in Jesus' death and the distinctiveness of the Christian message. The Jews are repulsed at Jesus message and they will eventually, in John's account, kill Jesus for his incarnational claim. Christianity will assert that this Jesus, God himself, is accessible to every human being, as basic as bread itself. There are no prophets or priests standing between the

human being and God. There is no temple ritual or dividing curtain, but the whole world has become the holy of holies, and we are all in the presence of the incarnate Christ. In the mundane, simple bread, he is present, he as ubiquitous as the food we eat. We have all become Elijah, you see, we have all become Moses and David and Zadok and Isaiah. We are in the presence of God, later in the book Jesus will assert that we all know his voice, that we are branches connected to the vine, sheep of the divine shepherd, etc.

In the first part of our lesson, Jesus seems almost exasperated with the Jews. In last week's reading from the verses immediately prior, the people come to Jesus and ask what sign he will perform. They have already seen it. They are looking for a Moses like event, and he has just done one, but they don't "believe" or better they don't "faith" in him. Just as their parents in the wilderness could not enter that Promised Land, Jesus contemporaries cannot enjoy the feast that is before them. They are blind to it, hungry they starve while God's nutritive gift sits right in front of them.

John then records a brief speech by Jesus for the reader. The people whom God does lead to Jesus, the folks who actually are in that faith relationship with him are secure. They are in God's hands and nothing can snatch them from him. Not even death can take them. Jesus will raise them on the last day. His filing system is impeccable, he never loses track of one of them. They are all his and he will never drive them away. They might wander away, mind you, they might leave of their own volition, but that rests on their heads, and cannot be laid at his feet. Again, the operative words here are all about faith. It is the one who "believes" and remember our failure of language here. This is not actually the Greek word for believe, but the Greek verb which corresponds to faith – "faithing."

The contemporaries of Jesus are put out by this claim on Jesus part. Jesus speaks of the mystery of faith and how this works. Only God can create that relationship. This is not a work of man, but a work of God. The Christian claim cannot be logically made or rationalized. It is not that what we say is always and necessarily contrary to reason or that it does not have an interior logic, but the faith which trusts Jesus to be Savior and Bread is just not something you can argue someone into. But once God puts you in there, something really interesting happens. You are given life itself. Jesus communicates wholeness to you. The Israelites in Moses time ate the Manna and died, but those who are partakers of Christ live without death and if they die, they live again in Him. He transcends death and they in him transcend it as well.

The bread which has come down from heaven is Jesus and the bread is nothing less than the flesh of Jesus. I know that right now it is really tempting to run right to a sacramental sermon but I actually would have you resist it if you can. To preach this sacramentally will not be the end of the world nor even approaching heresy, but I think it will actually be less than it could be. This is more about the incarnation of which the sacrament is but part of the story.

Jesus the life giver is life giving because God, the true God, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe came into the flesh of humanity. He has sanctified this human existence by running our

race with us, the human race. This is what gives life to the world, this is the life which is communicated in the sacrament. We tend to view the sacrament in a medical metaphor and that is not wrong but incomplete. It is like a pill which we take and it makes us better. And like medicine it must be taken appropriately and even prescribed only to certain individuals, etc.

But Jesus compares this bread, something we give to any hungry man and quite often to those who are not terribly hungry as well. The life of the world is in his flesh, in his incarnation. The life which is communicated in the sacrament is not merely a pill which makes us better, it is heaven itself, it is the Christ, life itself. I am not taking this sacrament to save my life, I am taking this sacrament because it is life. This life is also communicated in the Word of God, in the forgiveness, in the many ways that Jesus is enfleshed for my sake.

Just looking at the sacrament itself it seems to me we have minimalized it, stripped it down to the essentials and forgotten that it is so much more. Even the wafer we usually eat, the wine we usually drink are only technically bread and wine, they are not the experience of eating real bread. Think of going to a bakery and if they only offered you what passes for bread at the rail! You would walk out in a moment and head down the street. Real bread has crust and texture, it feels right, it smells right, it tastes right, it looks right. It even has the right crunch when you bite through the crust.

Yes, the wafer we consume is really bread and it is really is the body of Christ, but it is just barely so. One might say that is good because it demands faith, but I think we might err by not having a fuller experience. We have minimalized the sacrament to be simply the gift of forgiveness, as great as that is. And the sacrament surely does bring forgiveness, but just as sitting down with friends to share a meal is about so much more than the calories ingested, so too the sacrament is really about much more than the forgiveness of sins. If the forgiveness is the nutrients we need, is there not also joy to be found there? Is there not communion with one another, with God? Is there not beauty and pleasure and peace and comfort which is beyond simply the guilty which is assuaged? I believe so, and I fear that a sacramental sermon will miss much of this or at least a sacramental sermon which turns to the usual tropes about sacrament which infuse our language.

Perhaps we need to mine through our hymnody, especially some of our sacramental hymnody, because it often speaks eloquently of this. Immediately "At the Lamb's High Feast we Sing" comes to mind, or "Soul, Adorn Yourself with Gladness." There is actually a great deal more to those hymns than the medicine for a guilty conscience and the forgiveness metaphors with which we are most often familiar.

Jesus proclaims the incarnation to us today. He is in the flesh, the real human flesh. And that means life for all the world. How will we proclaim that this week?

Law

1. To have a hunger for life is another word for death.
2. Jesus in the flesh is tough. The Moslem has a point. I cannot really imagine that God would actually become a real human being, can I? I am much happier with a God who remains comfortably distant. Let's just talk about that Jesus and not the one close at hand.
3. I am weak with hunger and the task before me is larger than I can manage. What is more, there seem to be other options which are more plausible.
4. The emptiness of my life manifests in all sorts of things: The sins I commit, but also the brokenness of body, the anxious fear, the weariness, the poverty, and more. I seek to fill this empty place by treating the symptoms, but never really address the root cause of my malaise. I simply don't have true life, what I really have is a prolonged dying.
5. I like easy answers to complex questions. Give me a pill to make it better, don't tell me that I need to engage in a whole lifestyle change to deal with this problem. I want to keep my diet of bratwurst and bacon and still have a healthy heart. Likewise with my life lived in relationship to God. It is fine and good to talk about a spiritual life, but tell me that my favorite TV show or video game is filling my head and heart with violence and a sexuality which is contrary to God's way. The problem is complex and so is the solution.

Gospel

1. Jesus is the bread of life and those who are in the faith relationship with him no longer hunger for life, they have it.
2. God calls and creates the faith which trusts in Jesus. He does that in baptism, sacrament, Word, and community today. He has done that among us and continues to do that, even now. I cannot make faith, but God can. And that faith delights in the presence of Christ.
3. God has known my hunger and my weakness himself. He is not unsympathetic or uncaring. He has fed me with his potent food, uniting my sick and dying self to himself so that from Him I may derive strength.
4. Jesus is the bread of life which satisfies the otherwise satiable hunger and thirst which lies at my inner being. He is exactly what I need.
5. Jesus cuts through the complexity with profundity. "I am the bread of life" is really quite simple until you start to think about it. He gives us the simple words for the child and every mind to grasp, but he does not speak down to us either. Within the simplest of words are mysteries which deepest minds cannot fully fathom. Jesus really is the answer to every problem, he is the bread of life itself.

Sermon Ideas

1. Walking in the love of Christ (Epistle – that the Holy Spirit would move the hearer both to reassess his/her life in light of Christ’s work and to rededicate his/herself to living the whole of life in Christ’s love.)

This is potentially a law-only sermon and we really want to avoid that. We can make this into a check list which we need to do. Jesus doesn’t need us to do any of this. But he delights to see his life taken up. Finally this is not a “to do” list but is a “be” list. The hearer will need to come to the end of this and say, “He is describing me!” Paul speaks to people who have already been transformed from a fearful life into a joyful life in the light of Christ. They have already experienced the love of Christ. We cannot think that we are introducing them to the love of Christ and need to be building on that reality. Of course, sinners always need to hear that message of Christ’s love for sinners again. Don’t just blow by that.

But this sermon is really asking the what next sort of question. Now that Jesus has done all this for me, now that I am a redeemed and precious child of God, now that he is my bread, what does my life look like?

Paul was addressing the Gentiles, the folks who had come to this Christian movement recently, people who were not steeped in the Jewish traditions and the ethos of monotheism. It is interesting what he thinks is essential to their Christianity. Notice, having one’s catechism memorized is not one of the. Of course, memorizing the catechism is a good thing, but it is a good thing because it helps us be like the people which Paul describes here, not as an end unto itself. The old self, living in sinful darkness is taken off, like a garment, and we are re-clothed with Christ himself. Many early baptismal rites seemed to include being clothed in a white garment as the candidate came up from the waters of baptism, naked. It is also the origin of the white robes that some still wear at Confirmation.

The preacher will want to point out that this is not a prescription for particular actions but a prescription for a life which is lived out of the love which Christ has shown us. There is flexibility in how this love is shown. Different circumstances sometimes call for what almost looks like mutually exclusive acts of love. Saying yes to a hungry man but no to a drug seeking addict, both of whom as you for money, can be done in love. All of this life which we describe needs to be proclaimed as a living out of the love which God has poured into us. We are not earners, we are imitators. We are not more or less God’s children based on how well we are doing in this regard.

There are several points to Paul’s prescription which begins in vs 25. I list them below, but a wise preacher will likely only want to take one or two of these and construct a sermon. Remember – this will come around again.

- a. Put away falsehood – speak the truth. Jesus is the Truth and our lives are ordered based on truth. Paul’s reasoning for this is really interesting. We are all members of one another. To lie is a civil war in the body, with one body part at war with another body part. In today’s terms we call this an autoimmune disorder and those who suffer from Lupus, Rheumatoid Arthritis, and other autoimmune disorders will tell you it is terrible.
- b. Be angry and do not sin. Our current generation seems to identify anger as a sin. Or, in the case the outrage culture we increasingly see, as a virtue. We have a medication to calm you down. But Paul does not say the anger is the problem, the problem is what you do with it. Anger can in fact be a holy anger. The Bible attributes anger to God himself. But Paul also realizes the potential of problematic anger. Anger needs to be dealt with, now. Do not let the sun go down on anger. It gives the devil an opportunity.
- c. Some behaviors are simply incompatible with Christianity. Thievery is not a possible vocation for a Christian. Don’t even try to justify that. But the alternative, working for a living, is not self-seeking either. The honest business man who works only for himself is also problematic. His problems are different, but they are very real. The thief is enjoined to work so that he may share with others in need. Is that why we go to work?
- d. We are shaped by what we say and do. Words which come out of our mouths often become the very things which make us who we are. If we are constantly grumbling and complaining, we become that very sort of person. We have the ability to control some of this. I cannot change my feelings by thinking about feelings. I change them by what I say and do. Our words can build up and give grace to others. What can I say right now that does that?
- e. Our sins have a far more serious implication than simply an unhealthy lifestyle. We can grieve the Holy Spirit of God. The preacher may want to study this idea. Paul also writes of quenching the Spirit (I Thess. 5:19). Our sins have a potential to break relationship with God. Be careful with this. Some folks are led to a despair of sorts when this topic comes up.
- f. Paul envisions a life which is free from bitterness, anger, wrath, clamor, slander, and malice. But it is interesting that this is put into a passive sense. We let these things be put away from us. We are not charged with getting rid of them; rather, we let them go. We do that when we are kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. The preacher will want to hit this point hard. We don’t so much get rid of our vices as we replace them with Christ’s life. We imitate God, especially as we see him in Christ. We do that in kindness to one another, a tenderness of heart which does not simply walk by the

suffering of the neighbor, and in forgiveness, applying the blood of Christ to every situation in which we find ourselves.

The preacher will want to end with the final words of the pericope. This is an imitation. The real life, the genuine, perfect life is always Christ's. His is the perfect and fragrant offering for sin, not my goodness, kindness, and mercy. Any such virtue is always infused in me, not native, not my own, but always his.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

2. "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life" (That the Holy Spirit would comfort the hearer with the gift of the eternal life which is granted inside the faith relationship with Christ.)

Let the preacher beware – this is a dangerous sermon about faith.

It is a dangerous thing to talk about faith, the temptation there is to talk about faith and lose sight of Jesus. It is not really faith that saves us, but it is Jesus through the faith relationship who saves us. But there is a great good news which is ours in the discussion of faith as well. Jesus today reminds us that faith itself is a gift from God, the relationship in which he saves us is also an act of God. "No one comes to me unless the Father draws him," says Jesus today. And then, he makes the sweet promise that he never casts out those whom the Father has given him. Too often the world around us wants to tempt us into thinking that faith is our doing, it is our decision, it is our willful following of Christ's command or something like that. But faith is at its heart a relationship with God, a relationship which he establishes as an adoptive father holds another person's infant child in his arms and declares that child to be his own. He nurtures and cares for it, he sets up a college fund, and starts to buy more groceries. God has picked us up as less than infants, yes corpses, and loved us to life itself, a life which flows from his eternal love and which cannot therefore die.

The Jews at the time of Jesus grumbled and complained, they could not see it. Jesus knows that they cannot so he speaks of God's doing here. How much more helpless are we to see and believe in Jesus of our own volition and ability? Yet, Jesus calls us who have not seen and believed blessed (John 20:20-31), Jesus carefully reminds us today that he never kicks us out of this relationship. He will not hold us against our will, but he never forces us to leave either, He loves us, you see. God has done the impossible in us, he has given us faith, a relationship which trusts and loves and looks to Jesus for the solution to our deepest needs and problems.

3. Food for the Journey (OT and Gospel: That the hearer, recognizing the great gulf which lies between us and heaven would trust God to supply the sustenance and guidance to bring him/her to heaven's joy through the dismal days of earth's dying.)

Any sane and healthy person who looks at his or her life realizes there is a long way to go before we attain to heaven's perfection. Just read Paul's list of things which describe the new life and you will soon realize that this only describes me in part, and that is often too small a part. Like Elijah in the OT lesson today I am prone to fearful despair and depression. I find myself lying down under a broom tree and just asking God to end it all right there. But God does not leave us in our fear and despair. He does not delight in our misery or our sin. Instead he sends his servants into the world with the ultimate in comfort food so that we can be sustained for the journey on which he has sent us. This journey does indeed end in a life which is precisely described by Paul and even better. It is a life which takes us into the very presence of God where we will see him face to face, not with some cloak wrapped about our head like Elijah of old, but with eyes transformed to see him as he is (I John 3:1-3)

That food for the journey is none other than Jesus who has taken up residence in our lives and is busily about the task of renovating our hearts and lives, a grand remodeling project. He has paid the price of sin and guilt with his own flesh, and now, one person at a time, he is nourishing and sustaining his redeemed and precious people to heaven itself. It is a task which he will bring to completion on the last day (Philippians 1:6); don't worry so much about measuring the progress, but delight in the steps he has taken with you. The old way of life is no longer such an attractive thing for us. We may fall, it is true, but he always is there to pick us up and start anew. Slowly and surely our hearts and minds and lives are transformed as we eat the bread of life and his body becomes our bodies, his blood courses through our veins. His promise is to bring us to this journey's end. He will see this through. Right now, he asks that we trust him to captain this boat to heaven's shore. Enjoy the buffet, relax, Christ is the menu and he has what you need.

4. The fullness of life (Gospel - That the hearer would rejoice to hear that Christ has come to address his/her every need, he has born our sins and pains, even our death, so that he might supply our every need. He really is the Bread of Life!)

Jesus has come to give us life, real life, not some bandaged up old life which finally must fail of some cancer or heart disease which the doctors can no longer treat. The Israelite fathers ate manna in the desert, and they all died. Christ has come to give us the real thing, the thing we lost in a garden long ago, a life which delighted in God and good, which knew true joy and beautiful peace with neighbor and nature. This is so much more than simply the forgiveness of our sins, as significant as that is. To remove guilt is only part of the equation, it must be replaced with "right-ness" a shalom-peace which is only found in God and which changes everything about the world in which we live. As they

are lived right now, our lives are seriously out of joint. Would 10,000 years of this life really be heaven or would it be trending toward something much grimmer and warmer than heaven? A magic pill which gave me eternal life but left me otherwise unchanged would be cruel. In heaven we will realize this perfectly, but even here, in and amid this sinful world, we can gently and tenderheartedly forgive the sinner and bear with one another. We can rejoice in suffering and be filled with his love.

What makes this a tough and marvelous thing is God's most peculiar way of doing this. God has not sat upon some throne in heaven and waved his hand and removed our guilt and replaced it with this life. I suppose he could have, but that would have been an exercise in raw power. God is love. What we actually see is that God has come into the broken flesh of humanity. He has breathed our poisoned air and suffered and died. He has put on our life so that we can put on his life. In that incarnation of himself, he has born to himself our sin, suffering, and death, and given us his life, his peace and his joy. This is about the incarnation here. Jesus has taken up our human nature to himself and he has kept it. When he rose from the dead, he still was eating with disciples, and walking down roads with them. When Saul persecuted the Church, Jesus felt every lash and asked him why he persecuted "me?" that is Jesus. Jesus has not shed the human nature but now has united himself with it perfectly and universally. Jesus is present here today, in the flesh, I can touch him in the loving embrace of a neighbor, I can see him in the smile of forgiveness and hear him in the gentle words which restore me. I can smell him in the sweat of the fellow who helps me fix my lawnmower or I can taste the bread of life in a cup here at the altar or the casserole we share at a funeral lunch. I too am a manifestation of Jesus to this world. Jesus in the flesh, in my flesh too, is not a past tense thing, but a very presence tense thing. The bread of life, which brings true life to the world is right here, right now. I do not really need to wait for death to experience a foretaste of heaven, I get it now. The preacher can really speak of Jesus holistically here. Jesus is not just about the spiritual but the whole of human existence.

This means that now when I suffer, I am with Christ, he has taken this too. When I am fed, when I am warm, when I am surrounded by friends and family and all is good, this is a gift from God. Christ in his taking on the flesh of humanity has redeemed the whole of my humanity, the moments of joy and the days of sadness. He has sanctified them all because he lived them all for me and with me.

He is the bread of life, the true bread from heaven whose arrival has made all the difference in the world.