

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
August 31, 2003
John 6:41-51

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Jesus Is the Bread of Life

1. Bread that comes from heaven
2. Bread for eating
3. Bread that gives life

NIV John 6:41 At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." 42 They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" 43 "Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. 44 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. 46 No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. 47 I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. 50 But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus,

For those of you on the Atkins diet, bread is the enemy, isn't it? All those carbohydrates are standing in the way of weight loss and improved health. Maybe there's some truth to it. But a diehard bread-eater can take comfort in the fact that when Jesus fed 5000 hungry people, the menu consisted not of steak or chicken, but of barley loaves and fish. Bread lovers would struggle with the Atkins diet. No more rye bread or sourdough or fresh-baked French bread? It might be too high a price for them to pay.

The people that Jesus fed on the shores of Galilee liked bread, too. They liked the bread Jesus had fed them so much that they tracked him back to the other side of the lake. They probably thought the future was bright with possibilities if this man could say a prayer and turn a sack lunch into enough food to feed an army. But Jesus tells them here in John 6 that they've set their sights too low. They ate the loaves and had their fill—that's why they were here. They liked that full feeling in their stomachs and they liked how easily they'd gotten it. Jesus wants them and us to know that what's truly important is not the bread he makes,

but the bread he is. Here, in the first of seven “I AM” statements that Jesus will make in this Gospel, Jesus says, “**I am the bread of life.**” In the verses of today’s Gospel lesson, our Savior helps us to understand what he means when he calls himself “the bread of life.” Jesus, the bread of life, is 1] bread that comes from heaven, 2] bread that’s intended for eating, and 3] bread that gives life.

1. Bread that comes from heaven

Where we come in here in John 6 this is no longer the adoring crowd that after the feeding of the 5000 wanted to make Jesus their king. They had been listening to Jesus teach and they were finding his teaching hard to digest. A low murmur could be heard as Jesus was speaking. John explains what that was about. He writes, “*At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’*”

You can say this for the crowd: they correctly understood the gist of the Lord’s message. Jesus had said earlier, “**For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.**” He was talking about himself. Oh, this was hard for those people to accept. A miracle-working prophet who filled their bellies with free food—that they were glad to accept. But when Jesus said he’d come from heaven, well, that raised some issues for them. They said, “*Is this not Jesus the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven?’*” This was a local boy from Galilee. Maybe he’d tagged along when Joseph had done some carpentry work for them. Maybe they’d seen him in the synagogue on the Sabbath. At any rate, they *knew* him—or thought they did. And “*I came down from heaven*” was pretty outrageous talk for someone from lowly Nazareth.

But the people of Galilee clearly didn’t know Jesus as well as they thought they did. In those famous words of the first chapter of this Gospel, John writes, “**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.**” (1:14) Jesus is not merely man; he is the eternal Son of God who took on man’s nature. In the words of the *Te Deum*, that ancient confession of faith that we’ll sing after the sermon, Jesus is the Christ, the King of glory, the eternal Son of the Father, who became man to set us free. He came and bought us with the price of his own blood so that he could bring us to glory everlasting. That part of Jesus identity the crowd did not know—and they didn’t seem very interested in learning about it.

Of course, when Jesus spoke about bread that comes down from heaven, Jewish people immediately thought about their national history. During their wilderness wanderings between Egypt and the Promised Land, the LORD had “**satisfied them with the bread of heaven.**” (Ps. 105:40) That heavenly bread they called “*manna*,” Hebrew for “What is it?” When it covered the ground around the camp of Israel, it looked almost like frost. It tasted, the Bible says, like wafers made with honey. For 40 years, six days a week (double rations on

Friday), the LORD satisfied the people of Israel with the bread of heaven. This extraordinary miracle made short work of the logistical problem of trying to provide food for 2,000,000+ people.

But now Jesus is essentially telling the people here in John 6, “Just wait! I’ve got an even greater miracle for you. *I am the bread that came down from heaven.*” And what did they see? Well, the same fellow they’d seen for 30 or so years, Joseph and Mary’s son. And they murmured. But isn’t that the way God so often works? You come to God’s house to hear God’s Word and what do you see? Someone reading, teaching, preaching, from a book. God’s presence isn’t apparent to the senses. And people are baptized here, washed clean of their sins by God in the bath that Christ instituted. But what do you see? A few splashes of water applied to the candidate for baptism. You come here to feast with the Son of God in meal he established and in which he promises to be present. And what do you see? Small cups of wine and thin wafers of bread are being distributed. You can almost understand how an outsider might conclude, *Nothing much is happening here.* Just like the people of Galilee looked at Jesus and concluded, “*How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’?*” But all this comes from not listening to the Word. If you do as Martin Luther suggested, “Do not rationalize and reason it out! Close your eyes... Believe the Word which Christ submits to you.” *“I am the bread that came down from heaven.”*

Now when Jesus chose to call himself “bread” he was referring to something that is to be eaten. Even the most beautiful loaf of bread hasn’t served its real purpose if you simply set it on the table and admire it. You bite into it. You chew it, swallow it, digest it, and assimilate it. Though not in a physical way, the “bread of life” is also bread for eating.

2. Bread that is meant for eating

Jesus says in the last verse of this section, “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.*” The people there in Capernaum seemed to think that Jesus was encouraging physical eating—cannibalism of some sort. But through this entire section Jesus is calling his listeners to believe in him, not just as a glorified baker of barley bread, but as the one who is essential food for our souls.

As the murmuring in the crowd indicates, the people of Capernaum were not receptive to this invitation to believe. And the fact is, by nature we are all unreceptive to the gospel invitation. Jesus says here, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.*” (John 6:44) The word “draw” means to tug at something, to pull it. It’s used in the Gospels of pulling fishing nets up onto the shore or of drawing a sword. So God the Father uses the gospel of his Son to pull us out of our dark unbelief to fellowship with Jesus in the kingdom of light. Without this “drawing” work of the Father we couldn’t come to Jesus. We couldn’t believe in him. As our catechism says, “***I believe that I cannot by my***

own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.”

But the Father woos us, attracts us, draws us to his Son. How does he do that? Listen to Jesus: *“It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me,”* Jesus says. The Father uses the Word to draw us to his Son. That’s his instrument for bringing us to Jesus. Faith comes from hearing the message. By the gracious work of the Father through his Word, we are drawn to Jesus and eat the bread of life.

Ben Franklin was once faced with a decision about whether or not to publish what he considered a slanderous article in his newspaper. Refusing to publish the article, he knew, would probably cost him money in lost advertising revenue. So that night, he says, he went home and ate just bread and water. And the next morning when he got up, he ate just bread and water again. And, then, realizing that he could subsist on bread and water if he had to, he decided not to publish that article. Bread has that ability. With a little water and a little bread, a person can live for a long time. So, too, Jesus is the bread that gives life.

3. Bread that gives life

Jesus says, *“I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die.”* It wasn’t long after the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea and left Egypt that food became very scarce. It didn’t take a trained observer to see that there wasn’t a sufficient supply of food out there in the desert to sustain this mass of humanity. Before long some of the Israelites were expressing the fear that God had brought them out of Egypt into the desert to die. And others proved what short memories they had by expressing an almost nostalgic yearning for the good old days when they were slaves in Egypt and had plenty of meat to eat.

That’s when God responded to their grumbling, not by striking them down, but by sending manna. The grumbling turned to rejoicing as people scooped up the evidence of God’s faithfulness. The LORD hadn’t brought them out of slavery only to starve them in the wilderness. This bread from heaven meant life.

But you know, even though the LORD sustained the Israelites for 40 years by raining down manna on their camp, eventually all those Israelites died. They didn’t die of starvation, but they died of other causes. The manna, as miraculous as it was, sustained life only temporarily. They ate manna in the desert, and yet they died.

This is where Jesus, the bread of life, is far superior to the manna the people of Israel ate. Eat the bread of life, that is, rely on Jesus as the one who gave his life on the cross for your sins, and you will live forever. In Christ we have life and immortality.

That means something for the way we live, doesn't it? If we spend our life in pursuit of the bread that spoils while neglecting the bread that endures to eternal life, we're guilty of a terrible shortsightedness. But it isn't just the pursuit of our daily sustenance that gets in the way of our pursuit of the bread of life. Sometimes what's engaging our energy and attention are things that are of questionable value even for this life. The ease with which we're diverted from the things of eternal importance only underscores our need for the bread from heaven, for the forgiveness and the life that are to be found only in Jesus.

When Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," he compared himself to something we all have in our homes, to something very basic for our survival. By feeding the 5000, Jesus showed that he is concerned about our physical welfare. But here in John 6 as he presents himself as the bread of life, Jesus shows that his great concern is not that we die having lived a life of physical abundance, but that we have eternal life through faith in him. He is the living bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. Amen.