

12th Sunday after Pentecost B 11 August 2024

John 6:35, 41-51

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus says], 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.' Let's pray: ...

In the minds of the crowd of people in today's story, it was supposed to be another nosh-up; another food festival. That's why everyone showed up in today's gospel. But, instead of more bread they got Jesus and conflict. The two often go together. It seems that when we run into Jesus, we can't avoid the coincident conflict. There's always conflict between what is and what might be, between our understanding and his understanding, between knowing about Jesus and getting tangled up in a personal relationship with him.

Two weeks ago, we heard that Jesus fed 5000 people with five loaves and two fish. Last week, Jesus identified himself as the great I AM, declaring, "I AM the bread of life." And today, Jesus challenges the people to consider what kind of bread they are seeking and eating, perishable or imperishable, then he declares himself to be "the bread of life," "the living bread that came down from heaven." That's when the conflict started.

The Jews began to complain about Jesus. "He didn't come from heaven. We know all about him. He's Mary and Joseph's boy." They know facts about Jesus but they don't really know him or where he comes from. Jesus doesn't look anything like the bread they or their ancestors have eaten. When it comes to bread, they don't expect any more than what their ancestors got, manna in the wilderness.

Jesus tells them to stop complaining. “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Jesus offers them a choice, living bread or manna, life or death. That’s the same choice he offers each of us.

On the surface, there seems to be tension between Jesus and the Jews. In reality, the conflict isn’t external to the Jews; rather, it’s within them. That’s how it is with conflict (what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles [Matthew 15:18]). It originates from within us and gets projected outward and usually plays out as a fight with someone else.

The conflict for the Jews isn’t so much about Jesus but about their frame of reference, the boundaries they’ve created for God. Jesus is challenging them to step outside of the rigid, comfortable, and familiar context they have created for themselves. He refuses to be limited by either their understanding or their misunderstanding. He invites them to live a new, more expansive life, a life that springs from and grows greater than the life they’ve established for themselves. Jesus invites them to eat new bread.

When St John speaks of the Jews, his commentary isn’t limited to the Jewish people, individually or collectively. John is referring to any person or group who opposes Jesus, who refuses to see and understand the signs, anyone who would separate the gift of bread from the giver of life. The Jews could be anyone who acts this way. In this case it just happens to be the religious leaders and authorities of Jesus’ day.

We’re not so different from the Jews. We too have our own perspectives when it comes to how we think of and talk about God. Sometimes we try to contain or control God. At other times we try to exclude God. The problem isn’t that we have our own perspectives, but that they originate with us rather than with God.

When we live only from our personal frame of reference, we live hungry, empty lives. We work for manna rather than opening ourselves up to receive the true gift of the bread of life; Jesus. No matter how much manna we collect and eat, we can never satisfy ourselves. Manna might fill our bellies but it leaves our souls grumbling.

Often the things we've done and left undone prevent us from eating the bread of life. Sometimes our patterns of thinking, believing, the way we see the world, each other, or ourselves convince us there's no other bread and we should just settle for the same old manna our ancestors ate in the wilderness. At other times our history, fears, anxieties, guilt, regrets, pain, and losses become so firmly established that we're deceived into believing that we aren't even hungry.

It doesn't have to be like that. The table of God is set and there's a place for each one of us. [Hold up, *A PLACE FOR YOU*]. This is the resource I use to prepare children for First Communion. I chose it because of the way the author presents the plain and simple truth. There *is* a place for everyone at God's table. He won't reject and will feed anyone who hungers for his love. Saints, we're not destined to eat manna for the rest of our lives because our past, our history, even the different boxes we try to squish God into, neither earn us nor keep us from the bread of life. Rather, the living bread has come down from heaven to feed each one of us with true and everlasting life. Every moment of every day God invites us to eat new bread, to step out of our old Adam or Eve, into a new way of living and being.

God gives us bread from heaven, knowing that we're hungry; hungry for the deep mysteries of God. Our conflicts, our restlessness, our deep longings, our desires to love and be loved are hunger pains by which the Father draws us to his Son; who says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Jesus is indeed the bread of eternal life; holy bread for holy hunger; the gift of God for you, the people of God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.