

Sermon Pentecost 10B 01 August 2021
John 6:24-35
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, who is above all and through all and in all, now and forever. Amen.

“Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life,” ... They said to [Jesus], “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Let’s pray:

Do these people have amnesia? Are they selfish, ungrateful, greedy; or just dopey? Wait a minute. I just described myself!

I’m a hungry person in a hungry world. I’m always looking for something that will sustain and nourish my life, something that will fill and satisfy me. I’m looking for bread. And that’s not a problem until I eat the wrong kind of bread.

Think about the varieties of bread we eat in the world today. King David’s not the only one to have ever eaten the bread of betrayal, adultery, or murder. Think of the countries where people eat the bread of violence and war. The Conservatives and the Left share the bread of negativity, hostility, and name-calling. Many of us eat the bread of stubbornness and having to be right. We eat the bread of hurt feelings and resentment. Sometimes we eat the bread of loneliness, fear, and isolation. There are times we eat the bread of sorrow or guilt. Other times we eat the bread of power and control. Sometimes we eat the bread of revenge or one-up-man-ship. We eat all kinds of bread. The bread we eat reveals something about the nature of our appetites.

“You are what you eat” was a popular saying in the 1960s. It was the title of a book published in 1940.* But its origin goes back much further and its truth far deeper. In 1863 the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach said, “Man is what he eats.”** Before him a Frenchman named Savarin said, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.”*** And before that a first century Jew

named Jesus said, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” What we take in, the way in which we nourish ourselves, determines our health and well-being not only physically but emotionally, and spiritually.

“You are what you eat” doesn’t just refer to the food on our plates. It’s a deeply spiritual idea. Hunger is first of all a spiritual state and at its deepest reality it is hunger for God. We eat in order to live, but our greatest hunger, longing, and desire, is for God. As St Augustine said in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”**** However, this desire didn’t originate with us. Rather, its primordial beginnings are rooted firmly in God’s desire for us. God and human beings have a mutual longing, desire, and hunger for each other.

God first creates humanity with this desire and then satisfies that hunger with his own life. That’s the food that endures, the bread come down from heaven that gives life to the world. It’s the bread of joy, peace, humility, surrender, unity, beauty, generosity, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, wisdom, truth, faith, hope, love. This is the bread that satisfies. This is the bread of life embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus gives himself to us that we might become like him, that we might become what we eat.

Now, while we know that this is true and do our best to live it to some extent, we often settle for the illusion of having full tummies rather than seeking the true satisfaction of divine presence. That’s what the crowd in today’s gospel is seeking. Like them, we crave for food that perishes instead of food that endures. Just one day ago they ate their fill of bread and fish. Five loaves and two fish filled 5000 people. Today they’re back for more. They ate the fish and bread but missed the true abundance before them; Jesus Christ, God in person. “Do not work for the food that perishes but for food that endures to eternal life,” Jesus tells them. Unless they change their appetite, they’ll return empty, day after day after day...

We all know what that’s like – the emptiness, restlessness, and pangs of hunger that never subside – the continual searching day after day. We eat our fill, but are never really satisfied. We eat the food that perishes. We eat the bread of fear, sorrow, loss, judgement, anger, resentment, arrogance, lies, self-doubt, ego, false pride, self-hatred, regret, power, control. And it leaves us empty.

Every day we decide what food we'll eat. Every day we choose the food we'll feed others – our friends and families, those in need, strangers, our enemies, the world, even the church. And I get that this isn't a simple process. There's something in us that wants both the bread that endures and the bread that perishes. To be candid, there're times when I feel like grabbing a loaf of anger and whacking someone with it, and there've been times when I've sat alone eating the bread of self-pity. And guess what? They've left me hungrier than before I ate those loaves.

So the battle continues raging within us – the battle between our hunger for food that endures and our hunger for food that perishes. This tale from the Native American tradition illustrates well our inner conflict:

An old Cherokee chief is teaching his grandson about life.

“A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.”

He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”*****

Most people are concerned for their bellies. Jesus is concerned for their lives. People want to feed themselves with bread. Jesus wants to feed them with God. “Do not work for the food that perishes,” he tells them, “but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

The food that endures is Jesus himself. Jesus is the bread that is broken and distributed for the life of the world. Jesus is the bread that is broken, but never divided. Jesus is the bread that is eaten, but never goes stale or runs out. Jesus is the bread that blesses those who believe in and eat him.

When we believe in Jesus, eating, consuming, and taking him into our lives, we live differently. We see ourselves and others as people created in the image and likeness of God, not problems to be overcome. We trust the silence of prayer over the noise of disagreement. We choose love and forgiveness over anger and revenge. We're drawn to intimacy and vulnerability and repel superficiality and defensiveness. We listen for God's voice, turning a deaf ear to the din of human prattling. Ultimately, we seek life rather than death.

"I am the bread of life," Jesus tells the people. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus offers us himself. Jesus is the imperishable bread that nourishes and sustains imperishable life. Jesus offers himself to us in every one of our relationships: family, friends, strangers, enemies, those who agree with us, and those who disagree. In every situation and each day of our life, Jesus offers us the bread of imperishability, the bread of life; himself.

Is there anything tastier than love? Is there anything more liberating than forgiveness? Is there anything sweeter than communing with Jesus, each other, and all the company of heaven? Take and eat. Take and drink. Live, saints! Remember, you are what you eat. Amen.

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

**You Are What You Eat* by Victor H. Lindlahr, published by National Nutrition Society, 01 January 1940.

** https://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/12/messages/832.html

*** <https://www.gingersoftware.com/content/phrases/you-are-what-you-eat/>

*****St Augustine's Confessions* (Lib 1,1-2,2.5,5: CSEL 33, 1-5).

*****https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two_Wolves
