

HE IS THE TRUE BREAD OF HEAVEN THAT GIVES LIFE TO THE WORLD

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 4, 2024

Bread is one of the many staple foods found throughout the world. They make up a majority of a country's standard diet, providing most of their daily energy needs. Food staples are usually inexpensive, readily available, and easy to store. They include rice, wheat, oats, potatoes, yams, turnip, and beans. Now, if I lived in a country where yams or turnips were the staple food, I don't think I would survive! Yeck! In the Near East two thousand years ago, wheat was the primary food staple. It was often made into unleavened or leavened cakes of bread.

In today's gospel Jesus tells us that he was the true bread of heaven that gives life to the world.

On that day, there were many hungry people waiting for Jesus, looking for more bread. The previous day they had seen him feed over five thousand people with just a few loaves and a couple of fish. They were very impressed. But now their stomachs were grumbling again, and they wanted another quick meal. They spoke to Jesus about the time Moses provided bread to the masses of Hebrew people in the Wilderness of Sinai, manna from heaven.

That ancient story was one vivid with images of desperate hungry and thirsty people traveling mile after bone-wearying mile, plodding endlessly on under the intense Egyptian desert sun, baking their skin, cracking their lips. Their stomachs grumbling endlessly. Between the dehydration and the lack of calorie intake, these ancient people were probably weak and dizzy, their minds sometimes playing tricks on them. They were desperate for water and bread.

In the midst of this harsh and desperate reality, the story interjects what I think may have been a slice of comic relief. God sent down bread from heaven; from the sky above them. It settled overnight on the ground. God called it manna, not too unique of a word for this desert staple food. Manna is translated as, “what is it”. There’s our comic relief. Try to picture the scene. Thousands and thousands of people waking up in the morning, seeing a strange white flaky substance all over on the ground. They look at each other dumbfounded and turn to Moses asking, what is it? To which Moses replies, “What is it.” No, they say again more frustrated. We asked you, what is it called? And Moses says again, “What is it.” What is it. Manna from heaven. Sounds kind of like an Abott and Costello skit, “Who’s on First?”!

This Manna story was told by Jesus’ fellow countrymen to remind him how Moses provided a miracle of bread in the Wilderness so long ago. But Jesus replied to these hungry Jews: “I tell you the truth, Moses didn’t give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” God had provided sustenance to those Hebrew people long ago. But Jesus knew that the people in front of him needed something more substantial than physical bread for their empty bellies. They needed the spiritual bread of life. And so, Jesus told them that God offers them the true bread of God who gives life to the world.

They immediately asked him to give them this bread every day. Jesus replied: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” This reminds me of another story in the Gospels where Jesus met a woman at a well in Samaria. She was dipping her bucket into the well to draw up water for her daily needs. Jesus looked down at the well and then into her eyes, and told her:

“Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.” To this Samaritan woman at the well, and the Jewish people on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus was saying: you need never be thirsty again, you need never hungry again. I am the Artesian Spring. I am the bread of life!

Bread and water. The people wanted a never-ending supply of wheat and access daily to an artesian well. But Jesus knew that their minds were focused in the wrong direction. He knew that he could provide them so much more. What is it that Jesus offered the people that day? What does he offer you and me? He offers himself, the true bread from heaven and living water that gives eternal life.

But here’s the problem. When we hear of Jesus offer of eternal life, we immediately think of heaven, of that place we will be when we die. We think of Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins to provide us eternal salvation after we die. But this is not all that Jesus the bread of life and living water offers us. He offers us an abundant, life-giving life, right here and now as we live out our daily lives.

But here’s the catch as you and I experience it. Life is often hard. It is not easy. It’s painful. Maybe we move precariously and slowly. We may not be able to safely step onto a stepstool without the fear of falling. Our joints fail us. Our memory fails us. Our eyes and hearing fade. Sometimes life seems in many ways anything BUT abundant. But here’s where Jesus’ lesson today can help us.

The people Jesus spoke to that day wanted bread and water, physical substances to care for their physical bodies. But Jesus said that he was the

true bread and real water. He was not talking about physical things to take care of physical needs. He was talking about something much more enduring and valuable and necessary. Abundant eternal life.

Let me explain what Jesus was getting at by telling a story of two people I served as a hospice chaplain. Both were living with a terminal diagnosis. One of them was now bedridden and needed someone there to get him a drink or food; someone to turn him to avoid bedsores. He could no longer feel the sun on his face or the gentle breeze. By contrast, the other individual with a terminal diagnosis was still able to move around the house and, although it was a bit challenging at times, he could still care for his daily needs. He could also occasionally get outside and go for a ride.

As I observed these two men over time, one of them was experiencing a measure of this abundant fulfilling life that Jesus offers us, while the other was not. And it's not the individual you may be thinking of. You see, it was the bedridden man trying to stave off bedsores who was living an abundant life, while the other man who could still move around and go outside for a ride was not experiencing this quality of eternal abundant life.

The experience, or lack of abundant life, for either of these two men, as well as for all the people around Jesus two thousand years ago, ultimately had little to do with their physical circumstances. It did not depend on their mobility or the pain they experienced, or access to adequate bread or water. The answer to abundant life lay much deeper, it lay within their mind and heart and soul. It was something much less tangible but still very real. Some might call it something more religious or spiritual. The bedridden man had a deep abiding intimate connection to, and relationship with, Jesus Christ. Oh, Jesus had never spoke clearly to him. He never saw the face of Jesus Christ. But he KNEW Christ. He had heard Christ subtly through his

own thoughts. He had seen Christ in the face of his wife and daughter as they changed his bandages and gave him a drink of water. He had seen Christ in the bluebird that landed on the ledge outside one day. Because of this deep inner knowing, even in dying, this man was truly alive.

But the other man, much more mobile and able to get around and do things, He didn't see his existence as living life, he only saw it as living death. He did not experience the life abundant that Jesus offers. Jesus offer to both men is the same offer he gives to you and me, I am the true Bread of heaven that gives life to the world. Bread as a staple food, provides daily bodily energy needs, is inexpensive and readily available, so too, Jesus, the Bread from heaven offers each of us at any given moment in any day, abundant life, a life that can provide what we need. An inner quality of life that is free for all and readily available.

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