



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

First Reading: 2 Kings 4:42-44

Today's reading is part of a larger section of 2 Kings that describes the miracles of Elisha, the successor to Elijah. Here the prophet gives food to a hungry crowd. Though there is not enough food to go around, Elisha trusts God, who provides enough and even more to satisfy the need.

⁴²A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to [Elisha,] the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." ⁴³But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" ⁴⁴He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.

Second Reading: Ephesians 3:14-21

We have been rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, which surpasses all human knowledge. Because Christ dwells in our hearts, our lives are continuously strengthened and empowered by the ongoing presence of the Spirit.

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel: John 6:1-14

In John's gospel, the miracles of Jesus are called "signs," because they reveal the true character of God. As such, they remain within the mystery of God and cannot be brought under human control.

¹Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" ¹⁰Jesus said, "Make the people sit

down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

Sermon by Bishop-Elect Rev. Dee Pederson

July 25, 2021

Food and Jesus always seem to go together: In worship we come to HEAR the Living Word that is the Bread of Life and receive the Bread & Cup of Life at the Lord’s Supper. When we gather as Christian community, as we’ve been accustomed to doing in many ways, and look forward to being able to do so more freely once again: over coffee and cookies, in dinner groups, with s’mores around a campfire, at Sunday potlucks, around African feasts, or at Scandinavian festivals.

Food gives life not only to bodies, but to relationships and spirits, as well!

Some of my strongest childhood memories involve sharing meals together – especially at my Grandparent’s home on Sundays: Grandma was the one in charge of the kitchen, everyone else played supporting roles. The men gathered in the basement with my German Grandfather. We kids would play games or run around outside. When it was time to eat, my grandpa situated himself at one end of the table, then aunts & uncles along the sides, children at a side table, and Grandma only sat down at the other end after everything had been placed on the table. My cousin always led us in the grace before we ate, “*God is great, God is good.*” Then we’d dig in and enjoy every bite: fried chicken, corn, mashed potatoes – in the middle of which we’d make a lake for the gravy, salad, homemade bread, and finally – PIE or CAKE. Always.

Maybe YOU have a special “food memory” from your life. Pause for a moment and think about it. What is that food memory that sticks with you? If there is someone near you, take a moment to share it.

Memories of food and meals are POWERFUL ones – and food plays a big role in our lives. When we come home from work or school or college, it’s often to the refrigerator that we go first. When we’re stressed, we reach for a favorite “comfort food.” (Chocolate, perhaps?)

Food gives LIFE—not only to BODIES, but to relationships and spirits, as well!

Today there are 2 food stories before us, and in BOTH, God was ABUNDANTLY providing BREAD to hungry people.

When the 1st story takes place, there’s been FAMINE in the land. A man comes to the prophet Elisha bringing this incredibly generous gift of 20 barley loaves and a bag of grain. Not only that, but this is also “first fruits” – holy food. So, Elisha meets generosity with generosity, and tells the servant to *share*

the bread to feed all 100 the people there. Elisha's servant wonders how that relatively small amount of food could feed all those people. But Elisha said, *"Don't worry! Just do it! The LORD SAID there'll be enough for everyone to eat!"* And in fact, the whole community had all they needed; they were FILLED and there WERE leftovers to boot!

That's not a story we hear too often, but it was one that was certainly known by Jesus and some of his followers, and it would have come to mind when people later heard the story of the feeding of the 5,000.

Today's Gospel reading is the only miracle story that appears in all 4 Gospels. HERE, Jesus' popularity was on the rise. Word had gotten out about the healings he'd done. Large crowds began to follow. They weren't there because they saw *GOD* in him, as much as they saw him to be a famous miracle-worker who could help them eat their fill.

Often when we hear stories from the Bible, it's helpful to ask where YOU would place yourself in the story. With this story, it's easy for many of us to put ourselves in the crowd, coming to Jesus and receiving food from him. That's natural: every week we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." Luther's Small Catechism, from over 500 years ago, says that:

"Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like."

So think about all the ways in which we — you and I and people of our world — are hungry for daily bread. We may be famished for: food and water, for health, for an end to the pandemic, for an end to fear. We may be famished for belonging, for love, for time, to be forgiven, to relax and be refreshed.

There are so many kinds of HUNGER we deal with every day! So, it may be easy to find yourself identifying with the crowds on that hill, knowing some kind of hunger, and looking to Jesus to fill it.

But note that after they have been fed, they came to the wrong conclusion about Jesus, and they got the *"GIMMES."* They figure that if Jesus can provide bread like this, there's no telling what else he could do: give them housing, clothing, do something about the price of wheat, taxes, the Romans — all of the uncertainties, suffering, and evils people dealt with in their time. Jesus is their free lunch, so later on in John 6, the people cry out, *"Jesus, give us this bread always!"* And when Jesus wasn't meeting their needs any longer, they stopped following! That's the danger, the sin lurking, when we think we've eaten our fill.

So maybe we can identify with those crowds!

Well, there's another way to hear this story, and that involves recognizing ourselves in the disciples — those called by Jesus to get to work and SHARE. They're the ones who see the need of the people and try to do the problem-solving. They had to manage this hillside restaurant, organize the people, make them sit down in groups, and probably helped distribute food. They were supposed to be the stewards of those meager provisions - five barley loaves and 2 fish, and they couldn't imagine HOW that could

EVER be enough! *“Six months wages won’t be enough to feed all these people!?” Like Elisha’s servant, they wondered: “How can I set THIS before a hundred people?”*

Like those disciples, WE tend to think *“scarcity.”* So, we’re afraid of whether there will be enough.

We worry and hoard and hold back. Last year as we lived through the pandemic, and people were in quarantine, and supply chains were disrupted, we discovered just a bit of what it’s like to worry about whether we’d have enough. Worrying about having enough TP and food reminded me of how my grandmother always had BAGS of sugar stored in her attic. Well, she lived through the Great Depression, so she learned that she had to stock-up on things.

And yet, in this story, the disciples – and we ourselves! – discover that Jesus takes our scarcity mindset and turns it upside down, as one little boy’s act of sharing becomes gifts multiplied. Because in the presence of God, ALL of our, all of our gifts become ABUNDANCE and build community when they are shared - NOT when they’re hoarded, but when they’re SHARED — because that’s the nature of God, the Giver. And that’s really what it means to be the church.

Part of our identity involves coming to receive bread from Jesus — bread in all its forms. The fact is that many of the things for which you and I hunger can’t fill us: the “stuff” for which we hunger, some sort of an EASY LIFE we want to SAVOR. NONE of that will last the way that God’s WORD will! The only thing that can satisfy us is the Bread that is the Word of God:

+ *“It shall accomplish whatever I intend it to do,”* says God through Isaiah.

+ Psalm 19: *“Your law, your word, O Lord, is sweeter than honey!”*

+ In Ephesians, in 2nd reading, Paul says, *“I pray that you will have the power to comprehend the breadth & length & height & depth, and to know the LOVE OF GOD that SURPASSES knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”*

When the church gathers together in person or online – it gathers, on the one hand to RECEIVE from God’s abundance the Bread that will last forever, the Living Word, the Bread of Life. Jesus said, *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven.”*

And THEN, like the disciples, we who have received from God are here to SHARE the Bread that Jesus places in our hands. *Bread in all its forms:*

- Food — like the food you prepare to share with those who don’t have enough.
- Bread — that you bring to share among those in the congregation.
- Financial resources – shared for the ministries of your congregation, and a portion of those resources, shared in the ministries of your synod, connecting our 233 congregations to be better together, in Christ.

We have been blessed with so much – as Luther said. And over all of this we are given the gift of the Bread of Life — the Word of God you give to others: *I forgive you, I love you. God is with you so don’t be afraid. Jesus loves you no matter what. You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the*

+ cross of Christ forever.

In our congregations, we seek to live as disciples who give out of the gifts with which God has blessed us – our time, talent, and treasures. Like those 5 loaves and 2 fish, these are gifts placed in our care to steward and to share. GOD is the one who is the maker and owner of all things. We are humble stewards whose responsibility and JOY it is to share.

This week, you likely will enjoy many meals. May the food you receive at each of those meals remind you:

- of the One who is the *Giver*, who provides all that you need in abundance, and so - give thanks.
- that it only Jesus, the Bread of Life, who will satisfy your hungers and longings and cravings. Anything else and will not last.
- that you are one of those whom Jesus has called to SHARE his Bread.

Jesus said, *"I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE."* He is the Living Bread, the Word of Life, who comes from heaven to bring *life* to the whole world. And so, we respond with the words of St. Paul:

"Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."