



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

Readings and Sermon

August 8, 2021

Reading - 1 Kings 19:4-8 - ⁴But Elijah himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." ⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

Holy Gospel - John 6:35, 41-51 - ³⁵Jesus 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. ⁴¹Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴²They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" ⁴³Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I 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."

Sermon by Bishop-Elect Dee Pederson

Those who are following the Gospel readings will notice that from July 25 – August 22, the readings are ALL drawn from John, chapter 6. And each of those readings has something to do with FOOD and Jesus as the bread of Life. While that may seem a little repetitious to you, this beautiful image actually tells us so much about who God is, and who WE are in relation to God and to each other. Because God is always about feeding and *nourishing us*, and providing what we need - not only for our bodies, but for our hearts and for our relationships, as well!

If you think about some of the important or milestone times of our lives, *food* is at the center of a gathering of people:

- At Thanksgiving - you probably think about having turkey, and you can picture in your mind the family and places you've loved to go for that traditional Thanksgiving celebration.
- Or maybe you have certain foods associated with your family's Christmas traditions.
- Or - Birthday party food traditions.
- And because it's August, we might think about the State Fair food we love, and may or may not head out to enjoy this year – food like cheese curds and anything else they can put on a stick!

For many of us, those foods and meals and celebrations help define *WHO* we are as individuals and as families, and what our culture is. Meals have a powerful way of bringing us together, giving LIFE—not only to BODIES, but to relationships & our hearts, as well!

So it's not surprising to that the Bible is full of stories in which FOOD plays an important role.

- Garden of Eden – the fruit of the tree
- Today's story of Elijah and the cake
- Miracles of Jesus – turning water into wine
- The Last Supper – bread and wine
- The resurrected Jesus joining the disciples for a fish breakfast on the beach
- Vision of God's reign from Isaiah & Revelation, where all peoples & tribes are gathered together at the heavenly feast.

Today's Reading tells the story of Elijah, who has just completed a contest with the prophets of Baal, proving that the LORD is God. After that, Elijah orders the killing of the Baal prophets, and that doesn't go over too well. Queen Jezebel threatens to kill Elijah, so Elijah comes down off the mountain fleeing for his life. He's exhausted, ready to give up, and feels he can't go on. But during the night, an angel comes to him 2 times, provides warm, fresh bread, and tells him to eat so he'd have strength to carry on for the rest of his journey. God didn't scold him or judge him. God totally provides the strength Elijah needs to keep going. So he ate & gained strength!

The Gospel reading continues on from the story at the beginning of John 6, when Jesus fed the 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish. And it was a picnic those people would never forget! Free food: this went over pretty well! They wanted to have their stomachs full of the bread they could hold in their hands right now, to have their pantries full forever.

- Their desire to have more and MORE of this bread led Jesus to remind them of the Exodus story of how God provided manna in the wilderness for the people. That's what Jesus is referencing at vs. 48 of today's Gospel.
- Like the people in the Exodus, those who received bread from Jesus figured they had their very own MOSES to work wonders for *them*. So they weren't about to let Jesus out of their sight; they kept following and crying out for *more bread, more signs!*

And we get that! Like the crowds following Jesus, we sometimes get a taste of something *good*, and we *want MORE OF IT* - more food, more toys, more miracles, more stuff to hold in our hands, more signs of *God's power*. We, too, say to Jesus, "*GIVE US THIS BREAD ALWAYS!*"

But Jesus wants us to recognize that HE not only gives bread to fill *stomachs*. He gives a kind of nourishment that lasts forever! *"I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. That's what you need, and I'm it! I'm the real deal, right here, right now!"* Jesus said that THAT bread is so much more than anything you could ever imagine: a living in relationship w/God that changes you and the whole world beginning NOW!

You see, God wants to have a deeper, more personal relationship with people than to just be the one who puts food on the table. Certainly God DOES that, because God is the maker and Owner of all things. So God DOES want people to have food on their tables, because none of us can think about much else when we're hungry. On a global scale and local scale, we can barely wrap our minds around the needs of people who wait for food and water in refugee camps around the world, and closer to home - in small towns and cities in our own country. We know that that food insecurity has become much more complicated because of the pandemic. And we know that if you can't feed your family today, you may not be too concerned about eternity.

So, back in the beginning of John 6, Jesus tells the disciples, "YOU give them something to eat." In Matthew 25, Jesus says, *"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat."* And TODAY, Jesus sends US to share our bread. You & I do that:

- Locally – through funds and food shared with a nearby food shelf, through the other congregations of our SW MN synod.
 - When our synod received ELCA COVID-Response grants last year, we heard about the impact these grants made. Like the man who said that the hardest part of being homeless is the disrespect people show. Often walking down the street, some people quickly move to the other side, just because he didn't have as clean clothes as most people. But the time, respect, money, and food shared by our ELCA church members makes a difference.
- And you do that globally - with our partners of ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran World Relief.
 - I will never forget the testimony of one of the members of our congregation, who was a woman who fled the violence in Liberia, sought safety in one of our refugee camps, and received a quilt through Lutheran World Relief. When she got a quilt she said, "My quilt! I got a quilt!" And she knew Lutherans because she knew all of you who make quilts.

Jesus knew that hungry people need to be fed, and he sends us to take care of that.

But Jesus also knew that once we receive food to nourish our bodies physically today, we need to be fed with something that lasts eternally – forever – and to know that nourishment today. And so Jesus ALSO sends you as the church to bring people that word of Life today. He said, *"I AM the bread of life – the Living Bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

So how do we do this? How do you and I as part of the church, part of congregations, communicate this life that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world? Well, I think it looks today - the way it looked in Jesus:

- We meet people where they are. We go to them.
 - In each of our families, in every community, you and I know people who are not connected to a church and don't know life in Christ. So perhaps we begin by praying about who those people are and holding them in our hearts.
- We meet people the way Jesus did: listening, respecting, not judging, learning from them, and loving them.
 - All too often, we in the church have judged others, spoken harshly to them, and insisted that others become "just like us."
- We build relationships. Sometimes that begins with a simple smile. Or a few kind words. Or taking the time to actually pause and LISTEN to the concerns or hopes or fears of another person.
 - Perhaps that looks the way it did when a friend went to visit someone who was having a hard time of it. They didn't talk or try to teach them. They just listened. And then the person asked if they could come to that church to find out more about this Jesus who told us to simply love our neighbors.

We know that people in our communities are hungering for belonging and for relationships. YOU have known the Life that comes from Jesus:

- the Word made flesh, the child of Mary and Joseph –
- who on the night of his betrayal, opened his hand, took bread, said "This is my Body" and gave it to each of them.

The next day, true to God's mission, finally, he opened his hand to the nails of the cross. And then - 3 days later - he was raised from the DEAD so that all the world might receive Life forever.

The Living Bread came down from heaven to give ETERNAL LIFE to the world– not simply *as pie in the sky by and by* – but right now!! Jesus sends you – the church - to share your bread and to share the Living Bread. As has been said, this is the task of the church in these days: "*one hungry person telling another hungry person - where to find bread*" - the Living Bread from heaven. Amen.