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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Laetare (Fourth Sunday in Lent)

March 14, 2021

Text: John 6:1–15

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The OT appointed for today is Exodus 16. The people of Israel are in a desperate situation. They are tired, hungry, and ready to despair. Exodus 16:3, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” It would have been better to die as Egyptian slaves in the plagues than be out here in the wilderness suffering hunger as God’s free people. The Lord heard their cries for food. He provided them with manna which the Bible calls in other places “the grain of heaven” and “the bread of the angels” (Psalm 78). The Lord, in His great mercy, provided them with food even though they grumbled against Him in unbelief and resentment.

Here is where we must make some distinctions, however. The Lord God expects us, yea, even commands us to call upon Him in our day of trouble (Ps. 50:15) and to cast all our cares on Him (I Peter 5:7). So what is the difference between laying our cares and concerns before the Lord and grumbling? For it was a legitimate need the children of Israel had in the wilderness. It’s quite possible they had millions of mouths to feed with little or no means to fill those hungry mouths.

Grumbling is the kind of sin which arises from thinking we deserve better. These evils things shouldn’t be happening to us!! The Lord’s provisions and care are insufficient for our needs. Sinful grumbling is focused upon the self, from anger, selfishness, impatience, and unbelief. Saints of God, we must repent of all such attitudes and expectations. They are poison, killing soul, mind, and body.

But we are commanded by God to call upon Him with our needs. The difference is one of focus. Faith looks away from ourselves and focuses upon the mercies of God. Casting our cares and anxieties upon God in our day of trouble necessarily means articulating to God the need but with confidence and faith in His love and grace. We pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” and “Give us this day our daily bread.” God the Father promises that His good and gracious will

shall be accomplished and that includes providing for all our spiritual and bodily needs according to His wisdom and grace. Should we be interceding to God on behalf of the three estates? Christ's Church, the homes and families of our country, and the civic realm which includes government, business sectors and economy, education, agriculture, and broader culture? Absolutely. And she we not also be praying against the societal confusion that has enthralled our culture, from the effects of the pandemic, from the evils of human trafficking, pornography, drug abuse, the dissolution of families, poverty, spiritual darkness and unbelief? Yes. Absolutely. But not from a grumbling spirit of "we deserve better" but one of confidence and faith in God. He is our heavenly Father. His will is always best.

This is one lesson we learn from Exodus 16. But there is another, and it's the most important. When reading the OT, a good rule of thumb is to ask the question, "What does this passage teach me about Jesus, His Church, the Gospel, Christian faith, and so forth." Exodus 16:12 says, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God." The food that God provides His OT people in the wilderness was meant not only to satisfy their physical hunger but to show them that God is their God, their Savior. The manna in the wilderness was foreshadowing of a greater bread to come. This bread would show them Jesus. This is how the Lord Jesus Himself instructs us to read the OT in general but this passage in particular. Listen to John 6:32–35:

<sup>32</sup>Jesus then said to them (i.e., the crowd that had been fed miraculously with bread and fish), "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup>For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." <sup>34</sup>They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." <sup>35</sup>Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

Jesus is the bread of life. The manna in the wilderness, which God's people ate everyday for 40 years, was a prophetic preview of Jesus and the Bread of Life which He gives for the world, namely, Himself. And this is how we should read and think about Christ feeding the 5,000 with bread and fish, today's NT reading from John 6. Jesus provides for His people with Himself by the grace and power of His Word.

Let's consider the gospel text from John 6. A very large crowd was following Jesus because of the signs and wonders He had been doing. The Lord asked Philip, one of

His disciples, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (vs. 5). Philip had a very practical outlook on things and said they had about two hundred denarii, roughly 7 months’ worth of wages. Hardly enough to feed the crowd which we are told later in vs. 10 was about 5,000 men, not counting women and children. The crowd 10-15,000 people. It seems nobody really planned on such a gathering. Andrew, the first of our Lord’s disciples, is the one who found the five loaves and two fish and brought them to Jesus with the disclaimer, “...but what are they for so many?” (vs. 9).

The Lord Jesus, by the power of His Word, multiplies the fish and bread and thus provides food for the crowd. It’s an amazing miracle to be sure. But Jesus had much more in mind than simply providing a single meal for a single day. The Lord Jesus not only can provide bread, He is the bread, the bread of heaven given whereby those who eat it will never die. The multiplication of bread and fish is but a sign pointing to the life and salvation that is found only in the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember, just a few moments ago, I prefaced John 6 with teaching from Exodus 16 and from John 6:32 – 35. Jesus is the Bread of Heaven.

We need desperately God’s Word, specifically, the Lord Jesus, the Bread of Life. We need His forgiveness, life, and salvation. And He promises to give His love and life with absolute abundance. Christ Jesus does not ration His love. For His death and resurrection on the cross was for the forgiveness of all of humanity’s sins. In these difficult days, run to Jesus. Feast on Him as the bread of eternal life. Only He can calm wounded consciences, heal broken relationships, and give peace that surpasses understanding. The gospel text reminds us that the multitudes ate “as much as they wanted” (vs. 11) so that “they had eaten their fill” (vs. 12). And when it was all said and done, the disciples gathered up all the leftover fragments filling 12 baskets full so that nothing would be lost (vs. 13). The Lord Jesus loves and forgiveness in super abundance. And that which is placed into His hands will never be wasted or lost.

We Lutherans are quite accustomed to the idea of Christians needing God’s Word. One of the solas of the Reformation is Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone. The Lord Jesus resisted the devil’s wilderness temptation by quoting the Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). We must hold to this teaching fervently. God’s Word alone is the only infallible standard of faith and Christian practice. A great hymn worth memorizing is “God Word Is Our Great Heritage” (LSB 582). It has but one stanza and a memorable tune.

God's Word is our great heritage  
 And shall be ours forever;  
 To spread its light from age to age  
 Shall be our chief endeavor.  
 Through life it guides our way,  
 In death it is our stay.  
 Lord, grant, while worlds endure,  
 We keep its teachings pure  
 Throughout all generations.

God's Word guides us on our way through this world to the next. That's why we must keep its teachings pure in preaching, catechesis, and Bible study. For our sake and the salvation of future generations. And yet, there is another part of keeping God's Word that we must keep before us: the right use of the sacraments.

The feeding of the 5,000 in John 6 is not the Lord's Supper. But this feeding miracle is described in language that is very similar to the words used in the Lord's Supper. The verbs used in John 6 and in the words of Institution are virtually the same. Listen to vs. 11, "Jesus then took bread, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated." Now listen to the beginning of the Words of Institution, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said: "Take, eat; this is My body..." As Biblical Christians, we must give attention to receiving the Lord's Supper regularly and frequently. Jesus commanded us to receive it often for we need the forgiveness of sins often, day by day as He teaches us in the Lord's Prayer. The Christian Church, in her wisdom and piety, has adopted the practice of offering Holy Communion every Sunday in addition to every Sunday sermons! Word and Sacrament go together. Many of our communion hymns use the imagery and language of Jesus being the Bread of Heaven or the Bread of Life. One of our distribution hymns today is "Lord Jesus Christ, Life-Giving Bread" (LSB 625) is well worth learning, maybe even memorizing. Listen to stanza 1 with Exodus 16, John 6, and the Words of Institution in mind:

Lord Jesus Christ, life-giving bread,  
 May I in grace possess You.  
 Let me with holy food be fed,  
 In hunger I address You.  
 Prepare me well for You, O Lord,

And, humbly by my prayer implored,  
Give me Your grace and mercy.

The Lord Jesus is our God and Savior. He provides for all our needs of body and soul. As people born again through the living and abiding Word of God, let our commitment and love for God's Word and Sacraments grow and deepen.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.