

Laetare, The Fourth Sunday in Lent
St. John 6:24-36

Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, who fed five thousand men in the wilderness with five loaves and two fishes: We beseech You would graciously to abide with us also in the fullness of Your blessing. Preserve us from greed and the cares of this life, that we may seek first Your kingdom and Your righteousness and in all things perceive Your fatherly goodness. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.

In the Name of the One Sent from the Father, that we might believe in Him and be saved, Dear Fellow Redeemed;

The Labor of Death, the Work of Life

This Sunday is supposed to a bit of a respite from Lent. For the past three Sundays we have heard about the assaults of the devil, our epistle lessons have warned us that as Christians we are not to engage in the practices of the ungodly and have exhorted us to repentance and to humble confession of our faith in Jesus. The first three Sundays of Lent keep before us that spiritual struggle and our need for a Savior who defeats sin and Satan for us.

And as if sensing our weariness of that fight, today the church year gives us a little rest. There is a pause in the battle, and a reminder of our victory and our status as the children of God. In the Old Testament reading Isaiah declares the comfort the Lord brings to His people, especially those afflicted in their sin. We hear the lesson from Galatians where St. Paul reminds us that we have been set free from the slavery of sin and the Law, and encourages us to stand firm in the freedom Christ has won for us. And our Gospel lesson is the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, something – as St. John points out – which is

another sign of His divinity and Messiahship. As Jesus Himself will point out later in this sixth chapter of St. John, He has come into this world of sin and death as the true Bread of Life.

And this is the theme in our sermon text for this morning. It is the day after Jesus fed the five thousand. Many of those who had been fed have gone looking for Jesus; remember He had withdrawn because He knew they were going to try and make Him king by force. They find Jesus on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and in approaching Him are a bit surprised by His reaction. They thought He would be pleased that they had sought Him out, but instead Jesus chastises. *"Truly, truly I say to you,"* says Jesus, *"you are seeking 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 food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you"* (St John 6:26-27). If you had come because you wanted to hear more about the forgiveness of sins I'd be happy, says Jesus, but you're not. You're here because you want me to be your meal ticket.

And this puts them off. When Jesus directs those who sought Him to put their faith in Him, "to believe in the One [God] had sent," in other words to believe in Him as the Messiah who had come to bring relief from sin and guilt, they are annoyed. Who are you to say such things to us? is essentially their reply. We know what we need, and it isn't a bunch of spiritual talk about sin and the Bread of Life. *Take care of our real needs first, and then we'll see about the "putting our faith in You" part.* And when after our text, Jesus continues to preach about

Himself as the Bread of Life, their annoyance becomes anger, to the point that by the end of this chapter of John, the number of His followers is reduced from that over 5000 to 12. And even then Jesus notes that one of those is a traitor.

What it really comes down to is when they had a choice between the relief God wished to give them and the relief they wanted, they chose their way instead of God's. They probably even left Capernaum with some self-satisfaction about how they showed Him. No doubt there were many conversations in which many people confessed that those Pharisees were right all along. *Jesus talks a good game, but in the end He doesn't address my personal needs as a believer. He said a lot of nice things, but I just didn't feel like I was growing spiritually, the way I felt I should.*

And the attitude in that crowd should be a little disconcerting, because it is an attitude familiar to us. We know what it is like to have God surround us with the signs of His presence, we are gathered in a place where we see them often; His Word, His Baptism, His Supper. As Lutherans we even call these things the marks or signs of the Church, because God has said that because He is present in these things creating and sustaining faith, creating and building His Church. These are the things that bring us the relief of the Gospel, the message that our sins are forgiven.

And yet when we encounter these things, we are often put off and annoyed. We say to God, *"What must we do, to be doing the works of God?"* and God replies, *"Believe in the One I sent. Believe that declaration that your sins are forgiven because of My Son. Be baptized in the Name of the Father, Son and*

Holy Spirit. Eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.” And that answer doesn’t always satisfy us. There must be something more, we think. I must be missing something. It sounded okay at first, but now it doesn’t always seem to address my needs as a Christian. I don’t feel the spiritual growth that I think I should have. And so we start to look for other signs, ones that will direct us to the food that perishes and the labor of death, rather than Jesus’ work of life, and the life worked in us by the Holy Spirit. We are often like ungrateful children who complain to our parents that we don’t like what’s for supper, and we aren’t going to eat it. We want something else, even if its supposed to be bad for us.

Yet even in our dissatisfaction with Him, Jesus calls to us saying, *“I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to Me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst”* (St. John 6:35). Like a good parent our Father knows what food is best for us, and will not be swayed by the complaints of fickle children from giving them the food that gives life. And we, like hungry, remorseful children, return week after week, day after day to the table that God has prepared for us, to repent of our fickleness and sin, and to be filled with that Bread of Life, the message that God has forgiven us in Christ Jesus. This is why we say with David, *“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’ ”* (Psalm 122:1). In the house of the Lord, here, is where we find the Bread of Life and relief from sin.

The crowd in our text was distracted by the miraculous. Perhaps we have just the opposite problem. We are too often distracted by the ordinary. We see

the water, we hear the words, we taste the bread and wine and then we miss the miracle that is happening right in front of us. God has just communicated with us. He has come to us to forgive our sins and to strengthen our faith. He has provided for us a place where we can go to escape our spiritual hunger, to find assurance that we are saved. That is why this Sunday is known as Laetare, the Latin word for “rejoice”. We have reason to rejoice, because we have been reminded that God has not left us to fend for ourselves. Instead he comes to us through his means of grace to create faith in our hearts and to sustain that faith. To the world it seems like little. For us, it is an abundant feast of grace, a foretaste of the refreshment to be found in heaven. More than enough to provide for all who come to this feast to be fed.

Gloria Patri...

SDG