

WHAT IS THIS BREAD?

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Exodus 16:2–15, John 6:22–35

The whole congregation grumbled as one. They grumbled against Moses and against Aaron. They grumbled against God. They claimed it would have been better to die in Egypt. At least the food was good. They were hungry, bread-less and faithless. Sound familiar? Of course it does. When we're hungry, we act as if we have no God. But it also seems we do that when we're full too. Filled we don't need God; hungry we don't trust God. So what is God to do?

He rains down bread from heaven, it's not their way but His way. Six days there is bread collected every morning. On the seventh day there is none. Sunday through Thursday you collected just enough – give us this day our daily bread. On Friday enough bread is also collected for the Sabbath. If you tried to store it overnight on any other day of the week, it rotted and had worms in it but not on Friday. Daily bread. In the evening, meat. Quail fell from the sky.

God is gracious, He is good. It all comes as gift, by grace. The Israelites didn't work for it. They only collected it. Bread from heaven, and meat too. They called the bread "What is it?" Manna or Man-hu? In Hebrew it's a question – what is that? The answer was intended to fill them with faith: It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat." What is that? Grace Bread. Gift Bread. Bread from heaven!

In the Bible, bread makes its first appearance in Genesis chapter 3, after the Fall. **"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread until you return to the dust."** Bread is work – it's the farmer works, the miller works, the baker works, the grocer works, you work for your bread. Before the Fall, our food was fruits and nuts – embryonic life, no work. You simply plucked it and ate it. But we know the tragedy. A forbidden food was eaten, the Word of God was broken, and our diet changed. From life to death, from fruit to bread.

There was the unleavened bread of the Passover. Seven days of scrubbing every inch of the house, purging the wild yeast that symbolized the leaven of sin. Even at your best, you couldn't get rid of all of it. That's how it is with wild yeast; that's how it is with sin. Try as hard as you will, you can't be holy in the way the Lord our God is holy. Pure mostly, perhaps, but mostly isn't pure enough.

That was the bread you worked for; manna was bread "from above," bread that God gave you, teaching the Israelites that **"man shall not live by bread alone, but on every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God"** (Matthew 4:4).

Jesus multiplied bread in the wilderness, feeding 5000 men plus the women and children with just five little loaves. What a deal! World hunger solved! Put Jesus in charge of the bread. That's why they followed Him; they wanted to make Him king on the spot. Luther said that a ruler's coat of arms ought to always have a loaf of bread on it. These folks weren't kidding. They wanted Jesus as the Bread King.

Jesus knew this for He said: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life"** (John 6:28-27a). Our food is dead and dying. That's why we have refrigerators and freezers. There's an appetizing thought. But there is

another food, a food that Jesus, the Son of Man, gives. He has the Father's seal of approval, spoken in His Baptism. He is the well-pleasing Son, He is the bread of life.

The religious crowds were not thinking in terms of a gift but of works. ***“What must we do to be doing the works of God?”*** (John 6:28). Surely if we do the works of God, then God will be pleased with us and give us our bread. That's how bread is supposed to work, right? You work for it, and it comes to you as wages earned. But Jesus flips their question upside down with His answer. Listen carefully: ***“The work of God is this: that you believe in Him who He has sent.”*** (John 6:29). Faith is not our work but it's God's work, and it's the only work that is pleasing to God, to believe in His Son.

They demand a sign, as religious types often demand signs. The multiplied loaves just weren't enough. Our appetite for miracles is never seems to be satisfied. Faith based on miracles needs miracles to keep it going; and when the miracles cease or diminish then faith does too. Remember that. We're infected too. Don't think we aren't. If you had been on that hillside and on the receiving end of Jesus' multiplying of the bread, wouldn't you want a repeat performance? Or maybe something bigger or better! Maybe bread wouldn't be enough. Or maybe you'd want a miracle just for you, your own little personal miracle of your own choosing.

You would be hooked. You'd want more glorious and greater miracles. Your list would become endless. The Lord's Prayer would have to be changed to “Our vending machine who art in heaven”. But that's not the way of Jesus' giving. He's not only the bread giver, He's the Bread. He is the “bread of God” that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” He's the true manna. And the world says the same thing about Jesus as the Israelites said about the bread flakes that fell from the sky – what is that, what is this bread?

Is it Manna?

What is that – the Son of God become Man. What is that – God in the flesh come to save us. What is that – God dying on a cross to deal with our sin and death. What is that – the life of the Son of God for the life of the world.

With Jesus, bread receives its ultimate honor and meaning. Not only does He give bread for free, He's the Bread, the daily sustenance of our lives without which we cannot live. He's God's manna come down to us, the daily bread for our wilderness journey through this life on our way to a promised land of eternal life. Jesus takes the food of our affliction, the food of Adam's fall into sin and death, the food that we eat by the sweat of our brow, and He turns it into the “staff of life,” true and living Bread that rains down from heaven like manna feeding us, sustaining us, nourishing us not simply for this life but for eternal life.

There's a hunger we have that cannot be filled by this world's bread. We recognize that because no sooner do we eat, then we're hungry again. Skip a meal and the stomach growls, skip two and the head gets a little light. I like how kids say it when they're hungry – “I'm starving.” Well, they are not really. Starving is yet another matter.

We're born into a deep hunger that a diet of this world's bread that cannot satisfy. No matter how much we acquire, no matter how much we own, no matter how much power or prestige or wealth we manage to scrap together, it doesn't reach down to that gnawing, inner hunger. We may try to numb the cravings with the false breads of gluttony, drunkenness, of drugs, of sex, of pleasure, of all the things that promise “fulfillment” in our lives but ultimately leave us more and more empty. That

emptiness is a hunger of the soul, a spiritual hunger that calls for spiritual bread. This world's bread cannot satisfy that hunger no matter how much we gorge ourselves at the world's buffet.

Jesus says, ***"I am the Bread of Life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst"*** (John 6:35). Only Jesus can satisfy the deep hunger of the soul; only Jesus can quench the thirst we have for God. It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus took the bread at the Passover table on the night of His betrayal and broke it and gave it to His disciples, His Israel, as His very own body. He gives His flesh as bread for the life of the world and bids us His believers to eat, to live off of His sacrificial death, to draw our sustenance not from our own works but from His perfect work.

You are given to eat this manna from heaven, this living Bread that one may eat and never be hungry. You are given to live off the Bread of life, Jesus the Living Bread come down from the Father's generous hand. You are given to believe Him, to come to His table, to receive with your own mouth the very Bread that brings life forever. Yes, the world considers it foolishness as it pursues its' own bread. Yes, your own doubting hearts may well waver at this morsel that seems so small compared to what the world has to offer. Yes, the old Adam will tempt you to look to what it considers more substantial fare.

But this bread that Jesus gives, His own sacrificial body given up for your sin and the sin of the whole world, is true food, a food that can be had no other way, a food that will take you to resurrection and life.

What other bread can make that claim? No other!

Manna? What is that? It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat! For by His body and blood, by His bloody sweat and passion all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit.

What is this bread, it is Jesus and it is life, life eternal. In Jesus name, Amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN!