



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

11th Sunday after Pentecost: Year B, August 5, 2018

Sermon Title: “Daily Bread”

Gospel Text: John 6:24-35

Bread is the subject at hand today. In our Old Testament lesson, we encounter the Israelites as they wander on their way to the Promised Land. They were hungry – so hungry that they questioned Moses’s leadership and God’s love; so hungry that they longed for the “good old days,” when they’d been well-fed slaves in Egypt. And so in response to their need, God provided daily bread – a strange, white flaky substance as fine as frost that rained down from heaven. They called it “manna,” a word in Hebrew that means “what is it?” As strange as it was, manna would keep them nourished and alive. But would they be content with it? Or would they demand to be fed on *their* terms?

Bread is central in today’s Gospel lesson too. Last Sunday, we heard the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Remember that? The people in Galilee sure did. Word quickly traveled that Jesus was the guy to follow if you wanted a meal. And so when Jesus disappeared across the sea, his enthusiastic and very hungry admirers tracked him down. This was no easy feat. The distance from one side of the Galilee to the other could be as much as 8 miles. That’s a long row on an empty stomach. But they were hungry, and they demanded to be fed on *their* terms.

And so if our lessons today have caused your stomach to rumble a bit and your attention to drift toward your lunch plans, I sympathize. Believe me, I spent a lot of time thinking about bread this week as I pondered this sermon. I think the best bread I ever had in my life was my great aunt’s homemade Swedish Rye Bread. Fresh and brown and hot from the oven, covered in warm melted butter, it was heavenly. I have the recipe, but so far all I’ve been able to make are Swedish Rye Hockey Pucks.

But all of this bread talk has also caused me to reflect on a common, familiar, little phrase. I’ve probably said it thousands of times in my life, but have rarely given it adequate thought. “Give us today our daily bread.” Recognize that? It’s the fourth petition to the Lord’s Prayer. We pray it *all the time*. We’ll be praying it *today*. But do we ever consider what it *means*? What are we really *seeking* when we ask God for our *daily bread*?

On the most basic level, asking God for our daily bread is asking for the very things we need to survive. Luther called our daily bread “the necessities and nourishment for our bodies.”¹ He included in this category a broad range of common sense things that everyone needs: things like food, drink, clothing, and shelter. He’s right. Each one of us needs to feed our bodies in order to live. That kind of daily bread is a matter of life and death.

But our needs go beyond the merely biological. We need friends, families, and good neighbors. Our lives take on special richness when we are surrounded by people who love and support us, and people we can love and support. Companionship with humans and even our pets makes life worth living. We also need meaningful work. Having a job or a career that's fulfilling, that helps you grow and develop, and which meets a need in your community is wonderfully satisfying. This is just as true in retirement. The happiest retirees I know are the ones who remain active and who put their minds and bodies to work, using whatever gifts they have, and who can awake every morning confident that they possess the potential of making this day a little better for someone else.

But is daily bread some sort of transaction solely between you and God? Of course not. Our daily bread connects us to a grace-filled network of relationships. In the busyness of life though, we tend to forget that. And so when we pray for daily bread we ask God to help us be more *mindful of* and *grateful for* the *many* things that all have to come together for our daily bread to even exist. Take the simple example of a loaf of bread at the grocery store. Our gratitude for that loaf of bread should extend *beyond* the loaf and its individual slices to the person who stocked it on the shelf; the person who transported it to the grocery store; the government which provides safe roads for that transportation; the people who mixed, baked, and bagged the bread; the farmers who grew the ingredients; and last but certainly not least, God, who provided the fertile soil, the warm sun, and the abundant rain that enabled those ingredients to grow.

To pray for daily bread then is to pray in deep gratitude as we acknowledge that all good and necessary things are ultimately gifts from God. It's a prayer for connectedness too, as we acknowledge and remember that not one of us is an island. Our daily bread depends on an interconnected web of relationships. We need each other. This prayer then is a petition not just for *you*, but for your *neighbors* too, because just as your daily bread depends upon your neighbor, your neighbor's daily bread depends to some extent on you. And so we who are blessed with daily bread ask God to use us to be a blessing for others as well.

Jesus reminds us in today's Gospel though that it's not enough to just feed our *bodies* with daily bread. We need bread for our souls as well, the *bread of life* that only Jesus can provide. Why is it that we know we need to eat throughout the day in order to survive, but think we can go days, weeks, months, and maybe even years without *spiritual* sustenance? We sense that hunger, that inner yearning, and that emptiness, but too often we feed it with empty calories like the stuff we buy – so much stuff that we have to rent space just to store it. We also try to feed this hunger with our careers, entertainment, acclaim, addictions, and a host of other substitutes, all of which only leaves us feeling even emptier.

Jesus knows what we *really* need. We need spiritual daily bread alongside that physical bread. You're receiving spiritual bread here today, through worship, hearing God's Word, and receiving Holy Communion. But we need it more than one day a week. For example, all of us would immeasurably benefit from deeper, richer prayer lives. We tell ourselves we don't have time. Yet consider that without even breaking a sweat, anyone here can easily pray five times a day: a prayer at morning when you wake up; a prayer at night as you go to bed; and a prayer before each meal you eat. Use prayers from a book, make up your own, or sit in reverent silence.

Don't overcomplicate it. Prayer is a relationship, and a relationship takes commitment and time, not skill. Whether we know it or not, we're all starving for spiritual bread. Yes, Jesus loves you even if you don't come to worship, pray, or read a single verse of scripture. But he yearns to draw you closer so he can feed your spirit and give you the wholeness you crave. Jesus wants to give you daily bread.

In our staff meeting this week, we observed that there's probably no more self-centered creature in this world than a newborn baby. As a survival mechanism it demands to be fed. But unlike us, a newborn baby isn't picky or choosy. Somehow, the baby trusts that the person who loves it most will provide exactly what is needed. At some point we lose that beautiful ability to trust. We demand to be fed on *our* terms. Can we learn again to trust God to provide the daily bread we truly need?

Let us pray. Lord, make us mindful of and thankful for the daily necessities you provide to sustain and feed our bodies. Draw us closer to you and your Church so that our souls can be fed as well. Use us to help feed our neighbors too. Because we really do need each other. And we need *you*. Please give us today our daily bread, we humbly pray. Amen.

¹ See Luther's Small and Large Catechisms for additional information on his view of "daily bread."