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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
8/5/2012, The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15, Ephesians 4:1–16, John 6:24–35

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

<sup>35</sup>Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. (John 6:35, RSV)

This is a sermon about bread – both good, ole bread in the breadbasket and the Bread of Life. Let us love them both! I want to begin by talking about the Bread of Life, then turn to ordinary bread for a hungry world. First, the Bread of Life.

## THE BREAD OF LIFE

The Bread of Life is Jesus. That is what he claims in this morning’s Gospel Lesson, and it is what you and I believe about him:

*I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. (John 6:35, RSV)*

Jesus is nourishment for our souls. He is our desert food. He is our source of encouragement and guidance in life, and he is our hope of heaven.

When we were baptized, Jesus promised to be the Bread of Life *for us*. He is not only the Bread of Life for the Church, but also now for us – you and me, one by one, personally and individually. Baptism links us up with the very Bread of Life. It is entirely right, then, that we hasten on from Baptism to the Lord’s Supper, where we receive the Bread of Life Sunday by Sunday: “This is my body, this is my blood, for you,” for the forgiveness of sins, for the resurrection of the body, for life everlasting with the Triune God and all the saints and all the host of heaven, for every good thing.

One of the most lovely paragraphs of commentary I know on Jesus as the Bread of Life comes from the pen of Luther. He says this:

When the Lord says: “He who comes to me shall not hunger and thirst,” he means that one who does so *will not die*. These words should be inscribed in every heart with golden letters, yes, rather with living letters. Then everyone may know where to entrust his soul and where he will go after this life’s close. Everyone may acquire this golden knowledge and be able to say at night when retiring, early in the morning when

rising, or when engaged in some other occupation: “My soul remains with Christ. There I will never hunger or thirst. This Man will not lie to me... Trusting these words, I will lie down to sleep in the evening and get up in the morning; on these words I will rely whether I sleep, walk, toil, or walk across a bridge. For even if all about me should go to pieces, if father and mother, emperor and pope, monk and priest, princes and lords, should leave me, even if Moses cannot help me, I shall hasten to Christ and there find help. For these words are true.”(LW 23:44)

Today’s Gospel Lesson asks us to remember the divine dimension. Bread in the breadbasket is good, but do not labor for that good bread in such a way that we neglect the Bread of Life. It is as Jesus says in this morning’s text from St. John:

<sup>27</sup>Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal. (John 6:27, RSV)

In like manner, Jesus pleads with us in St. Matthew:

<sup>19</sup>Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: <sup>20</sup>But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21, KJV)

Each of us desires not to have lived in vain. Each of us must reckon with a long eternity stretching ahead of us, and we would like to enjoy that eternity living, with abundant life, not just for threescore and ten years, nor a hundred years, nor ten thousands years, nor any such span of time, but for ages upon ages, world without end. There are plans to be fulfilled, adventures to live, worlds to be explored, and the potentials of our humanity to be pushed to ever greater limits. We do not want to miss out on eternity. We *need* the Bread of Life.

So, that is the theme of my first discourse. We need the Bread of Life. Now, let’s turn to the second theme: we also should pray for ordinary bread in the breadbasket.

## ORDINARY BREAD

When the day is done and nighttime has come, I am like many of you: I say the Lord's Prayer at the end of the day. Sometimes I fall asleep right in the midst of the prayer. Strange that I should do so when it is such a short prayer. But I stretch it out some because I like to ponder and visualize each line of the Prayer. I hardly ever make it to the end, the prayer is so rich, and so I drift off to sleep before I am done. And maybe that's not such a bad way to entrust the day over to the Lord.

Anyway, have you noticed that most of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer are spiritual sounding? They have to do with love of the Lord and the life of faith in a world where faith is contested. Even that political-sounding petition about "thy kingdom come" is a prayer for *faith*, at least as Martin Luther understands it. He points out that God's kingdom is coming, even without our prayer, but that in this prayer we ask that that kingdom will come *to us*, even *now*:

"May your kingdom come."

What is this? Answer:

In fact, God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come *to us*.

How does this come about? Answer:

Whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through his grace we *believe* his Holy Word and live godly lives *here in time* and hereafter in eternity. (*Small Catechism*, The Lord's Prayer, Kolb Wengert edition, my emphasis)

The one exception to the spiritual character of these petitions seems to be the Fourth Petition. This is a prayer for bread -- for good, old-fashioned bread in the breadbox. "Give us this day our daily bread." Luther rightly points out that the word "bread" should be expanded to include all the necessities of life -- all that we need to make it through another day. And the list of necessities might be larger than we at first think, for we need many practical things each day to keep us going. Here is Luther's list:

What then does "daily bread" mean? Answer:

Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.

So, Luther points to many such supplies we need in our earthly pilgrimage. But let's not forget the fundamental meaning of "bread," for that is important too. When we pray as our Lord taught us, we take time to pray for bread. And make it

good bread, like they have in the bakery at nearby Fairway on 86<sup>th</sup> Street or at Hot and Crusty. Let it be heavy, nutty, wholesome bread, just waiting for some butter to fill your hungry tummy.

Let it be the kind of bread the folks wanted who came chasing after Jesus. They had had bread aplenty on the mountain, thanks to our Lord's miracle of the multiplication of loaves, and now they want more. I do not mean to gainsay them for that. There is so much hunger in this world it breaks the heart. Especially it is awful when we think of hungry children. This world just should not be that way – that children should be hungry! So pray that Fourth Petition with earnestness. Give us – this whole blooming world – give us this day our daily bread.

Even here in America, there are folks who know that bread is not to be taken for granted, but is a gift from God. Carol and I just got back from visiting my brother and sister down on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. My sister is married to a farmer – a man I have long admired and have much affection for. His name is E.L. Brown. When E.L. said the table grace for us, he would give thanks for the food and the day and the family gathered around the table. And then he would gently add in the line, "Some rain would be nice, Lord. Amen." Well, the corn crop is already lost. E.L. plans to simply till it back into the ground. There is not enough corn to justify the expense of the fuel to harvest it. But the bean crop has a chance to flourish if it gets rain in due season. So, I too pray, "Some rain would be nice, Lord."

That's here in America, where we have some many natural blessings of water and power and transportation and markets and so on. Even here the farmer knows that daily bread is a blessing from God for which it is good to pray.

But think of other lands – poorer lands. My wife, Pastor Carol Fryer, has recently returned from a mission trip to Tanzania. She climbed that mountain! She climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, and then she visited Bishop Buberwa, Pastor Lermy Lwankomezi, and other friends and ministries in Tanzania. Carol loves Africa because faith somehow seems more clear there. When Tanzanians say good-bye to each other, for example, they say, "I will see you tomorrow *if the Lord wills.*" The shadow of death hovers continually. It is not unusual to wake up in the morning to the news that "Brother or Sister so-and-so died last night."

And when Tanzanian Christians pray for their "daily bread," they literally mean "daily." In such a poor nation, having food cannot be taken for granted, but must be a matter of daily striving, daily prayer and thanksgiving. And yet the people are generous and peaceful. The Bread of life in their lives works out to the sharing of daily bread with those in need.

For example, I love the way people give their offerings in the church service. Some people have money they can put in the offering plate – Tanzanian shillings – but many people give things from the shamba or the farm. They give vegetables or fruits: bananas, avocados, and so. Or maybe they give chickens. So, the people process forward and give their offerings. Then they give gifts to visitors from the offering. We have a photo of Carol, for example, with a big bunch of bananas lying at her feet and a chicken squirming in our arms. Then, after the liturgy, they

take the rest of the offerings and hold an auction. That's how they get money to keep the church going.

The Tanzanian people are close to the earth. They are grateful for bread day by day, and they are glad to pray for it. Give us this day our daily bread.

## OUR NEIGHBORS NEED US

I close with this idea: the Bread of Life in us should lead to caring about ordinary bread in a hungry world. That is, Jesus dwelling in our hearts should lead us to care about hunger in this world.

Our brother St. Paul had the Bread of Life. I think he refers to it in one of the classic texts for what is called "the mystical union of Christ and the believer." The famous passage goes this way:

<sup>20</sup>I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives *in me*; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20 RSV)

Somehow, judging by this text, Christ Jesus has gotten *into* Paul. Indeed, Jesus has gotten into Paul so thoroughly that the apostle says that it is "no longer I who live, but Christ..." Besides this important text, there is the witness of the manner of Paul's life. Even if we did not have his testimony that Christ lived in him, we could still ponder Paul's life, the tribulations he bore, his tireless work, and the way he poured out his life for the world and think to ourselves, "There goes a Christ-like man."

Or, to borrow the language from St. Paul's prayer in last Sunday's Epistle Lesson, Paul has permitted Jesus to take up residence *in his heart*. He knows this reality himself and he prays for it in the Ephesians too:

<sup>16</sup>I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, <sup>17</sup>and that Christ may  *dwell in your hearts* through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Ephesians 3:16-17, NRSV)

Such dwelling of Christ in our hearts bodes well for eternity, but also for our neighbors here and now. The hungry, the lonely, the discouraged: they would all have reason for some more hope in this world if the Bread of life were to dwell in our hearts.

Likewise here in our town, when the Bread of life takes up residence in our hearts, then bread on earth is spread abroad too. Indeed all kinds of good things happen when Jesus dwells in the heart. Covetousness, lust, narcissism,

procrastination, squandering of talents all decline, and charity, honesty, and virtue increase on earth, to the benefit of our neighbors.

Let us then seek this Bread of life. For the sake of eternity and for the sake of our neighbor here and now, let us labor for that Bread which does not perish but which endures to eternal life, through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.