

“Manna and Meno”
(Pr13/L18) Pentecost 11 – 8.5.18 – Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 & John 6:24-35

Grace and peace to you from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I had a professor in Seminary who was a renowned teacher of Luther's Theology. Students loved his fresh approach to sharing Luther's insights, and he even recited parallel passages from King Lear at times. Right up my theatrical alley. But unfortunately, he was the kind of teacher who asked questions with one word and one word only that correctly answers the question. I found that completely frustrating, as he would pause in front of a classmate, his glasses perched on his nose, and wait, while the student sweated and guessed which word he might be looking for. Luckily, Jesus isn't seeking answers from you today. What Jesus wants more than anything is for you to understand that everything he teaches and everything he does is about a relationship with you.

So what does a relationship with Jesus have to do with bread? Well, last week we heard about the feeding of 5,000 folks, now we have 5 more weeks to explore bread and what Jesus had to say about it in John's Gospel – just a little summer sermon series. Our Old Testament reading today talks about the people of Israel in the wilderness, being fed by God on **Manna** (you know the story...) Now, imagine you are among Jesus' folks who lived the metaphor that manna represents: you have to collect it every day. You can only get your own. It doesn't keep overnight. There is never too much of it. There is always enough of it.

Manna, literally means: *What is it?* Or, as we might say, “What's THIS?” Professor Craig Barnes had a lot to tell us in his lectures at the Festival of Homiletics this past May. He imagined the mornings in the desert: Now, probably the moms gathered manna each a.m. They would then bring it back to the tent to prepare for the family meals, with no “What is it” Helper available. They did it every day. You can imagine the surly teens at the breakfast table, “*What is it?*” to which the harried housewife would answer, “Yes.”

Here's the thing. God provides miraculous food and we get hooked into the why of it all. We get curious and we get involved in the reasons and process and the God who relates to us.

What is it that we are doing in this desert?

What is it that you are saying to me today, God?

What is it that you want from my life?

And Jesus is just helping us understand that it's not about baked dough at all. He was introducing them, and us, to a whole new thing - something that was not just about their hunger, but much more about their life.

Remember story of Creation and Fall in Genesis? Do you recall the one tree that God told Adam and Eve was taboo? They could eat of any tree in the whole garden but that one tree. Why do you think God put the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil right in the middle of the Garden of Eden? Didn't God know that Adam and Eve would pass by it every day and yearn to have what God had not given them? And then what happened when they decided to take for themselves what God had not yet given to them? Yep. They lost Paradise.

The Human Condition is complex, especially as created relating to the Creator.

Folks, we are born hungry and thirsty. We yearn for more. We not only want to do God's work, we want to be God! We want to be in control of life and have power over others. We simply cannot surrender any part of what we are, and have, not even to the grace-filled and loving God who

created us in the beginning. Believe, me, I understand. It's hard not to have our own way. But I tell you, we will sell out when tempted as Jesus was.

In Dostoevsky's classic novel, ***The Brothers Karamazov***, one of the strands of the story has the Grand Inquisitor (sort of a stand in for all that opposes God) coming upon Jesus walking the streets of Seville. He makes his case for the depravity of humanity thus:

*"You came into this world empty-handed with nothing but some vague promises of freedom – which people cannot even conceive, and which they fear and dread – for there has never been anything more difficult for human society to bear than freedom. In the end, people will always lay their freedom at our feet and say to us, "enslave us; but **feed** us."*

We hunger, yet we can choose to be stewards of our hunger, to respond to our deep yearnings like we actually were the children of God, and learn to bring our hunger and thirst and longings to the One who has fashioned those very desires so that we might come to him...not ashamed of not being whole.

Chapter 6 of John's Gospel conveys some major themes for Jesus' teaching. Jesus is not posing a "riddle" for them to solve or for us to figure out. Jesus is feeding them - while he reminds us all where we come from.

This is the miracle of ***meno***, most often translated as "*abide*" (including the ideas of dwelling, tabernacling, living among, being a part of, staying with.) Our complaints, cries, yearnings are all heard by the God who is with us, Emmanuel. And for Jesus, who says, "I AM the bread of life" is a sign by itself – he is claiming his divinity by using the great I AM title which Moses learned was God's name in a conversation he had with a burning bush.

I AM your nourishment. I AM the one who provides for your life.

I AM the one who will never leave you or forsake you.

I AM the one who created you from the first,
who knit you together in your mother's womb.

I AM the light of the world.

I AM the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world...

And I AM with you always, until the close of the age.

When we hear Jesus say, *I AM the Bread of Life*, we can feel the crowd's desperate yearning - "*Sir, give us this bread always.*" We also hear the echoes of the Woman at the Well - "*Sir, give me this water always.*"

And while we know there is always more where that came from - that God is never depleted, never without more love - perhaps today we might begin to thank God for yearnings - for the hunger and thirst that draws us in to the abundant life of Christ who abides with us. We might just need to remember our place in God's Kingdom, in God's world!

A boy had five barley loaves and two fish, and the disciples didn't think that would feed 5,000 people. But Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now, when Jesus says, "sit down," he is either going to teach you - or feed you. Or maybe he'll do both. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church
Olathe, KS

Resources: Dr. Craig Barnes lectures, May 2018 Festival of Homiletics, Washington, DC.

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