

August 2, 2009  
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

“Bread of Life”

Text: John 6:22-35

Has anyone ever asked you why you go to church on Sunday? How did or would you answer that question? I think that most of us would have to pause for a minute and contemplate before we answered, and that’s good because I would hope that we have made church so much a part of our life that we don’t really think about why we go, we just do it because it’s what we do. After thinking about it we might say something like, “Because I’m a Christian. I follow Christ. Going to church is one of the things people who follow Christ do.”

The reason we follow Christ is one of the things that we are called to consider when we hear the “bread of life” discourse in chapter six of St. John’s Gospel which makes up our Gospel reading for three consecutive Sundays starting today. “Following Jesus” is a theme that runs throughout the narrative, and Jesus makes it pretty obvious from the beginning that folks are following for wrong reasons.

This narrative takes place immediately after the feeding of the 5000 and then Jesus walking on water; the accounts which we’ve read from St. Mark’s Gospel the past two Sunday. If you remember, the disciples had left in the boat but Jesus had gone off to be by Himself and pray. John gives us a little bit more information when he writes, *“Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”*

Our reading begins the next morning when the crowd wakes up and says, “Where’s Jesus?” Jesus is gone, having taken His miraculous aquatic stroll out to meet the twelve in the boat. So the people follow Jesus, tracking Him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. When they find Him they ask, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” And given Jesus’ response, I kind of wonder if that question was their roundabout way of saying, “Hey Jesus, are we too late for breakfast?”

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”* They perceive Jesus not as a savior and certainly not as their God and Lord, but as somebody who can make life easier and more comfortable by providing food. Jesus tells them He is about much more than just daily bread for earthly life. *“Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on Him God the Father has set His seal.”*

Naturally the folks ask what work they need do to obtain such eternal life food. Jesus replies *“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”* Jesus tells the people to have enduring faith in the one whom God has sent; in Jesus Himself.

The people ask for another sign from Jesus, and then bring up what they perceive as a much greater feeding, the 40-year provision by God of manna in the wilderness for the wandering people of Israel to eat. Jesus says there is a much greater bread than that. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”*

They said to him, *“Sir, give us this bread always,”* but they still didn’t get it. When they said this, I think they were still thinking about their stomachs. They wanted Jesus as their bread-maker, who would make life good for them by keeping their bellies full.

Is Jesus our bread king? It seems to be that way for a whole lot of people today. There are a whole lot of churches with preachers proclaiming that if you believe enough, are faithful enough, follow Jesus enough, then He will make your life easier and more comfortable. They look at the feeding of the 5000 and say, “Jesus will do that for you too.” They look at Jesus’ calming of the storm and say, “Jesus will calm the storms of your life too.” They look at Jesus’ numerous healings and say, “Jesus will heal you also.” That’s not what Jesus says.

*“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’”*

Jesus is obviously speaking in a metaphor. The “I” is emphatic and it is quite clear that Jesus is speaking in eternal terms here. Jesus is calling on the people to have faith in Him, the bread of life, for their eternal life. Jesus is talking about the last day, resurrection and everlasting satisfaction and fullness. Jesus wants the people to follow Him in faith into God’s eternal kingdom. The people want to follow Jesus to the dinner table at meal time.

Many still look at Jesus this way. They have a misguided faith that believes following Jesus translates into the good life here and now, or at least some time soon. They follow Jesus because they think He promises they will not hunger or thirst, they won’t be in need, in fact that they will be rewarded plentifully in this life with health and wealth and happiness.

This misguided belief can even infect we faithful people who show up at the good and proper Lutheran church on Sunday. Let’s face it. Most of us are doing pretty good. We’ve got bread on our tables. Our bellies are full. Just stop by our Wednesday night pot luck and you’ll see the yummy abundance we enjoy. But we can start thinking along the lines of the reason we are so blessed is because we are faithful, because we come to church on Sunday, because we follow Jesus. Because we have such a wonderful bread king.

Don’t get me wrong. God does provide our material blessings and it is good and right that we thank and praise Him for our abundance. But we follow Him because He is the bread of life—eternal and everlasting life. We follow because His blood has purchased us a life infinitely better than the fallen and broken one we enjoy right now.

Why is this important? Because food spoils and rots and decays. Life falls apart. It is the nature of this world. Monetary fortunes have disappeared for many in this latest recession. Even those who have plenty suffer the effects of sin in their relationships with family and friends and happiness eludes them. Whatever your situation, your health eventually fades. All the daily bread in the world is not going to keep death from your door.

If we follow Jesus as our bread king, the one who makes this life comfortable and happy, what’s going to happen to that faith when life is painful and heart-wrenching? If we follow Jesus because of this life, who are we following when we face this life’s end?

Jesus is not a bread king. He did not join into our humanity to make everything of this life hunky dory and bliss. He came into this life we live to suffer. He came into this life we live to be stripped of everything of this life. He came into this life to die to it, that all the sinful consequences of this life would die with Him.

He rose to a different life. That life is the life without want or hunger or thirst. That life is the one in which there is eternal satisfaction and fullness. That life is the life of which Jesus is the bread. That is the life into which Jesus wishes us to follow Him in faith. Following Him as some sort of bread king makes Him so much less than what He is; it makes Him worldly—the bread that spoils. Jesus is the bread of the next world, the next life, the life without end. Jesus is the King who provides infinitely more than bread, but joy and happiness and life without end.

Remember why we follow Jesus: because He is the Son of God who takes away the sins of the world and defeats death for us. We follow Him because He is the true bread that sustains us when the blight of sin brings its consequence of death to this life. We follow Him because He died to this earthly life and rose to eternal life, and He calls us to follow Him, the bread of life, through death to life everlasting, filled and satisfied forevermore.