

31 August 2003
Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Where is Your Life?”

Text: John 6:41-51 (Ephesians 4:30-5:2)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

God is in the business of giving us what we need – even if its not always what we want.

That fact causes no small amount of stumbling to people in our world today. To people both outside the Church and inside the Church. Because we have grown accustomed to getting what we *want* and are no longer satisfied with having only what we *need*. We no longer expect to help and serve others, but expect others to help and serve us. And we are increasingly becoming unable to deny ourselves any wish or pleasure or desire. And so life for many today has become the practiced pursuit of accumulating to myself all that I want.

But is that what life is? A life of dissatisfaction and an endless longing and striving for more? A life of upheaval and uncertainty, where what is mine today may not be mine tomorrow? A life where many would-be-gods promise us everything but deliver nothing? . . . For many, sadly, that is life. It is the only life they have ever known. . . . But such a life is a life of slavery. To be sure, it is slavery *disguised* as the freedom to have and pursue everything and anything we want! But it is slavery nonetheless. Slavery to the very things we think are freeing us and giving us happiness and life.

And this slavery becomes evident whenever someone *even suggests* that we cannot have what we want, or that perhaps what we want is not good for us. So entrenched and enslaved are we in this kind of life that when it is threatened there is an immediate and intense backlash – even if the one telling us that is God. And so when God places limits, and says that there are things we may want but cannot have, there is anger. When God takes away what we want in order to give us what we need, there is resentment. When God gives us what we need instead of what we want, we question His motives and His love for us. We want life on our terms, but God, the author of life, knows that life on our terms is really no life at all – but only a slow progression in slavery towards death. Both temporal, earthly death, and eternal death.

But that is not only the way life is with us, in our day and age – that is also the situation that we see unfolding in the Holy Gospel that we heard this evening. The great crowd of people that had gathered around Jesus knew what they *wanted*. They had heard of the mighty acts that Jesus had done, they had heard Him teach with authority, and they had just been miraculously fed by Jesus, for they were among the over 5,000 people whom Jesus had fed with only five loaves of bread and two fish! And they wanted this bounty to continue! They imagined life in a world under the kingship of Jesus, where whenever they were hungry, Jesus would feed them. And whenever they were sick, Jesus would heal them. And whenever they were in danger, Jesus would protect them. And they thought back to the glory days of Israel, when Moses fed the people with manna, when King David led the people in battle and achieved glorious victories, when prophets like Elijah and Elisha were able to heal the sick and raise the dead. But with Jesus it would be even greater than all of that! And so after being fed by Jesus, they followed Him across the Sea of Galilee, *because they knew what they wanted*.

But God is in the business of giving us what we need – and what the people needed then, and what we need today, is not an earthly king who will make life easy for us, who will let us indulge our every desire, and who will make sure our life is good for 80 or 90 years. Although that is maybe what we think we *want*, we *need* much more than that. We need someone to save us from this world, and to save us from ourselves. We need a Saviour who will point us past our short-sightedness, where what happens today and tomorrow is of the utmost importance, and focus us instead on things eternal. We need a Saviour who will lead us out of our slavery to sin, and focus us instead on things outside of ourselves. We need a Saviour who will provide for us not what we think is life, but who will provide for us life as He created it. *That is what we need . . .*

And so Jesus tells the people gathered around Him by the Sea of Galilee that they got it wrong. He said to them, ***“Yes, your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness. God miraculously provided food for them for 40 years. And you know what happened to them? They died.”*** And the implication is that Jesus *could* do the same thing. Yes, He could stay and set up shop right there by the Sea of Galilee. He could provide food for them everyday. He could kick the Romans out. He could do all sorts of things. And you know what would happen to them? To the people? They would die, just like their fathers. . . . And so too for us. Jesus could give us everything we want. He could make life easy for us. He could do all sorts of things. And you know what would happen to us? We would die.

Well that’s not good enough for God! He loves you more than that. He loves you too much to simply give you what you want. He loves you too much to let you die in your sins. And so no, Jesus says, no. ***“I am the bread of life. . . . I am the living bread that***

came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Or in other words, we are living a life that leads to death, but He is going to die a death that leads to life. There will be no earthly kingdom. He came down from heaven, and He is returning to heaven, but He is not going empty-handed! No, He is taking with Him our flesh, our human nature, resurrected and victorious over sin and death and the power of the devil, and now ascended into the life of heaven.

And that same flesh and blood, that conquered sin, that conquered death, that conquered the devil; that same flesh and blood that died our death but rose to life again; that same flesh and blood that Jesus gave for the life of the world . . . that same flesh and blood He now gives to you, at His Table, at His Supper. For He is the bread of life, for the life of the world. And so while He may not give you an *easy* life, He does here give you His life. And while He may not indulge your every want and desire, He does here give you faith, to see beyond the temporary things of this world. And though we may grumble and complain and question and doubt, about what we are or are not given, about who got more than we did, or about fairness, He here gives you His forgiveness. And with His gifts of faith, life, and forgiveness, we truly have all that we need.

Now, in addition to these gifts, God does in fact give us much more, and much than we desire and ask Him for. God does not want us to be monks, or ascetics, and not enjoy the life that He has given us! And so Jesus did heal and feed and take care of many people, both before and after this time. And God does give us those things that help us to enjoy the life that He has given us. New homes, new cars, new jobs, new friends and relationships and children, new churches. But the mistake we often make is judging our relationship to God on the basis of these things, as if God must be pleased with us when He gives us these things, and therefore displeased with us if these things are not given, or are taken away. And it is that kind of thinking leads to the dissatisfaction and the grumbling that so marks our world, and the thinking that God isn't giving us what we deserve.

But no, God's love for you is not proved in wealth, or privilege, or success, or power, or any other thing in this world. God's love for you is proved by His promise of a Saviour fulfilled; by the fact that Jesus was there by the Sea of Galilee; by the fact that He went onto the cross, out of the tomb, and into your heart. By the fact that He washed you clean and made you His child in Holy Baptism, that He has given you His Word to teach you of Him, that He is feeding you and forgiving you. Always forgiving you. Not holding your sins against you, but erasing them and forgiving through the body and blood of Jesus, once given and shed on the cross, and now given and poured out on His altar. As we sang, "*Here, O my Lord, I see you face to face.*" And here we do see Him. And His face

is not that of an angry judge, nor that of a spoiling grandfather, but the steadfast face of our Saviour, who would let nothing stand in the way of His cross.

And that is how we know God. That is how we think of God. Only in the cross. For there we see God in His glory. There we see His love. There we see Him as He really is. The things of this world come and go, sometimes astonishingly easily and quickly. But the love of God and His forgiveness will never be taken from you. And as we look at the world and at our lives in that way, through the cross, we will begin to see things as they really are. And then, to paraphrase what St. Paul wrote, ***“all the bitterness and wrath and anger and malice and grumbling will be put away from you. Replaced with kindness and tenderheartedness and forgiveness, as God in Christ forgave you.”***

So dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do not be deceived by the voices, the truths, and the philosophies of this world, and do not follow them in grumbling and complaint. For there is a kingdom and a life the world does not know. A kingdom which lives in you. The kingdom of the cross, the kingdom of God’s grace, the kingdom ruled through forgiveness. This kingdom has no end. Ruled by a King who is greatest because He became the least. A King who rules over life and death. This King is your King, and His Kingdom is your Kingdom, and in His flesh is your life. So ***“arise and eat”*** and receive again your King and His Kingdom. Repent and be washed clean. Hear and believe. Eat and live. And depart in freedom and in peace. You have received all that you need.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.