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Pentecost 11

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Wonder Bread”

Text: John 6:24-35 (Exodus 16:2-15; Ephesians 4:17-24)

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

The people saw the wonders, but they did not see the signs. That is to say, they saw Jesus heal the sick and drive out demons; they saw Him multiply the loaves and fishes; they heard Him teach with an authority not of this world – but they could *not* see beyond these wonders. They could not see what these things pointed to. They saw the things of *this* world, but not of the next. They saw a man, but they could not believe that this man was God.

But that was the point of the wonders that Jesus performed – that they would *not* be just wonders, but *signs* pointing to a greater reality. That the people would not just marvel, but ***believe in the One that the Father had sent.*** The One sent to be the Saviour. But with eyes firmly focused on the wants and needs of this world, a Saviour is not what they wanted, nor what they thought they needed. They wanted the *wonder bread* Jesus had set before them, but not the *wonder bread* that God had set before them! But the first could only sustain the life they already had; the second could give them a life they did not have. And so this greater bread, this greater life, Jesus now sets before the people. And before us. Directing our eyes to things above. ***Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life.***

The question is: do we have eyes to see? Or are *our* eyes too firmly focused on the things of this world and life? Even as Christians.

Sadly, we too miss the signs. For we tend to think, do we not, that if only Jesus were here today! If only He were here today multiplying a few loaves of bread and fish, and healing, and teaching, and raising the dead – then our church would be so full there wouldn't be room enough for all the people who would come! Wouldn't that be great! . . . But thinking in that way, we are just like the crowds who chased down Jesus that day, focusing on the wonders but missing the signs.

For the truth is that Jesus *is* here, and He *is* performing wonders and signs. We pray in

the Lord's Prayer *Give us this day our daily bread*, and every day our Lord is doing just that – and for many more than the 5,000 gathered that day on the hillside! But do we realize it? That day by day, God *is* providing us not only *food and drink*, but also *clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like?* (Small Catechism, explanation of the 4th petition) Or do we take these things for granted, or worse, thank ourselves for them? Our health and healing? Our jobs and advancement? Everything that we have and are? The work of men, of us? Or the work of God, *for* us?

And then what of the signs and wonders that God is working in His Church each day? Maybe we'll do a little test here!

#1: When's the last time you saw someone raised from the dead? The answer is the last time you witnessed a baptism. (Rom 6)

#2: When's the last time you heard God speak to you? Just a moment ago when you heard the very Word of God read to you here. (2 Tim 3)

#3: How about the last day, the final judgment; when's the last time you practiced for that? Answer: this morning, when in confession and absolution you heard the verdict that will be pronounced upon you that day, namely that in Christ you are forgiven, not guilty. For what you heard here *is just as valid and certain . . . as if Christ our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.* (Mt 18; Jn 20; Small Catechism, explanation to the Office of the Keys)

#4: And then what about the *wonder bread*? That's an easy one, and by now you're catching on! It's here, on this altar, every week. Not just bread, but the body and blood of Jesus Himself. Not just food, but forgiveness. Not just bread, but the bread of life. (Mt 26)

Do we fail to see these signs because these wonders come to us in such ordinary ways, through such ordinary means, and by such ordinary men? It has been that way since the beginning, when satan blinded the eyes of Adam and Eve and focused them on something more, something bigger, something better, something a bit more exciting. And we are following in their steps – the folks in the wilderness, grumbling against Moses and Aaron . . . and God! The folks on the hillside that day with ordinary-looking Jesus, asking for *another* sign. And still also us today. Taking for granted and taking advantage. Being, as St. Paul wrote in the Epistle: ***darkened in our understanding, ignorant, hard, calloused.*** (Eph 4)

Dear saints, direct your eyes to things above. ***Put off your old self, and put on the new.*** (Eph 4) ***Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal***

life. And let us ask with the crowd that day: ***what must we do, then, to be doing this? To be doing the works of God?***

The answer to that question is both easy and hard. It is something you do and at the same time something you cannot do. **Believe.** See behind the wonders and see the signs – the hand of God at work in your life. The free gifts of this life that God by grace gives now that signify the even greater gift of eternal life that God gives by grace through faith. For that is the work of God, and why Jesus lived and died and lives again – that you believe, and by believing have life in His Name. (Jn 20:31)

As I said, that is both easy and hard. It's easy when life is easy, but hard when life gets rough. It's easy because it's so simple, and yet hard because we think the work of God has to be difficult and complicated. We see this in our evangelism and outreach, when, like the folks asked of Jesus that day, folks ask us: *What do I have to do to be saved?* When we say **believe**, the reaction is often times disappointment. Oh. Yes, well, what else? Nothing else. Now that *doesn't* mean that there is nothing that we do as Christians! There is much to do! And much that God is doing through you. But it does mean that when it comes to your salvation, there is nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there is nothing you can do to make God love you less. The cross shows us that. God cannot love you more than that . . . or less than that. For there, your sins have been atoned for, you are forgiven, it is done. The work of God, *for you.*

And though this believing is something that we do, it is at the same time something that we cannot do – it is the gift of God. (Eph 2; 1 Cor 12) As Luther wrote in the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: I believe that I cannot believe! *I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him.* It is the work of God. And so Jesus says to the crowd: You want to work the works of God? ***This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.*** And toward this end our Lord is always working – at all times, in all places, and in all things. To one end: that we believe in Him and His work of salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life.

And so to this end the Father sent His Son, to work the work of God on the cross. To take our sin away from us and put it on Himself, that we might be set free. And to this end the Son sends the Spirit, to work the work of God in us. To give us the gifts and grace of God, that we might believe. **And the highest worship of God, the best and most important thing we can do, is to believe in Him and desire to receive His gifts.** (Ap IV. 310) And that is what the Divine Service is all about. We gather here and worship how? By receiving the service of God. We sing of this, too, in the offertory that we sing in some of our Divine Services, when we ask (quoting Psalm 116): *What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me?* Remember that? Remember the answer? #1: offer

the sacrifice of thanksgiving, for all that God *has done* for us; #2: call upon the name of the Lord, for all that He *will do* for us; and #3: I will take the cup of salvation, or what God is doing *for us now*, here. I will take the cup that He gives me. The cup that is the New Testament in His blood, shed for me for the forgiveness of my sins. My work that is not my work at all, but His, for me.

And so still today Jesus is directing our minds to things above. And it is an ongoing task! To shift our minds from sin to salvation; from what I want to what He wants; from the things of this world to the next; from what we do to what Christ has done for us. To see in our food and work and parents and spouses; to see in water, words, and bread and wine; to see in a dying, bleeding man on a cross – the work of God for us. So that we believe. That as we eat our wonder bread now, so too will we eat it forever, at the banquet feast of Heaven that shall never end.

Lord, give us this bread always!

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.