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Pentecost 9

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Bread of Life”

Text: John 6:22-35; Exodus 16:2-15; Ephesians 4:1-16

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

Sin is taking something God has given for holy use and using it in an unholy manner. It is to take what God created good and for our good use and use it in a way that is *not* good - it is not to use but to *abuse* creation in selfish and hurtful ways. Sin swings our life from going in the right direction to going in the wrong direction; from fellowship, or communion, with God, to isolation and separation from God. And so sin is serious, and it is deadly. There is no such thing as a little sin, or a harmless sin. All sin, if allowed to grow and flourish in the heart can take over that heart and kill faith.

With that in mind, Medieval theologians came up with a list of what came to be called the “seven deadly sins.” You’ve probably heard of that before. I’m not going to list them here, but instead focus on one, which the readings that we heard today call to mind: and that is gluttony.

Now, usually we think of gluttony as eating too much - and certainly, it is that. But perhaps it would be better for us today to think of it not only in that way, but as the insatiable appetite for more, whatever than *more* happens to be. And so people today are gluttonous not only when it comes to food, but also to sex, and power, and drink, and possessions. Almost anything that we can have or possess or use, we can gluttonously want more of. Even more attention, more love, more peace, more ease. Never being satisfied, never being content with what we have, but wanting more. Making these things our gods and so living for them. Chasing after and praising the things of this world instead of the God who gave them.

That is what Jesus accuses the people of doing in the Holy Gospel that we heard today. They chased after Him, yes, but **“not because [they] saw the signs, but because [they] ate [their] fill of the loaves.”** And they wanted more. And they wanted Jesus to give it to them. The question for you and me today is: could we be doing the same thing? Could we be chasing after Jesus for the wrong reasons? Trying to get what we want *from Him* instead of receiving what He has come to give *to us*?

And so today, with His words, Jesus seeks to turn our appetites to Himself. That we feed on Him as the Bread of Life. That we seek Him not for what He can do for us, but because of who He is and what He *has done* for us. That we ***“labor not for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which [He] will give to you.”*** That if we be gluttonous, we be gluttonous for Him and His gifts.

That, Jesus says, is the reason why the manna in the desert. Was it given as food to nourish their bodies? Of course. But not only that. It was also given to draw the people to faith in the God who would provide *each day*. Each day. For each day, they could take no more manna than they needed for that day (unless it was a Sabbath). Each day that had to trust in God to give them what they needed. Each morning they had to awake and trust in their giving God, that there would indeed be manna on the ground for that day. If they did not, and unfaithfully gathered too much, it was rotten and wormy and uneatable the next day. The manna was given to sustain them body *and* soul, to strengthen faith, and point them to God.

And so it was with Jesus and the feeding of the 5,000 with the five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus provided this meal for the people not just to fill their bellies, but to point them to Himself. That He is God in the flesh. That He is the One who has come to satisfy our *greatest* need - our need for forgiveness to overcome our sin and sinful desires; our need for life to overcome death; our need for salvation to re-establish our communion and fellowship with God. For that is the hunger we can never satisfy - only He can. Only He who came for us, to be ***the Bread of Life***.

That is why our gluttony for things in this world can never satisfy us and why we can never get enough - it is not really what we are hungry for. And so all our efforts do is make us fatter and hungrier at the same time! We strive but never reach. We achieve but never succeed. And we don't understand it. We don't understand why. And so unsatisfied, we grumble; we blame others; we blame God.

But so that we might have what we need and be satisfied, God sent His Son. To be for us what we cannot be for ourselves. To give us what we cannot get for ourselves. And so Jesus says to you and me today: ***“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”*** And that is true whether you are in the wilderness or in a palace; whether you have much or little; whether high or low; whether struggling or secure. There is only One who has what you need. Who can satisfy your hunger and fill you with good things. Who can turn you back from death to life. It is the One who has come to give you Himself, and so says to you: *Come. Take eat, this is My body, given for you. Take drink, this is My blood, shed for you. Come, and hunger and thirst no more.* For I am the Bread of Life and there is no other. I am the Bread of Life and I give Myself for you.

And with those words, our minds and hearts and appetites are turned away from the things of this world and *getting*, to Him who gives and *receiving*. It was for this purpose that God chose Israel to be His people - that He might give, and they receive. It is why He created the Church - that He might give, and we receive. It is why you are here today - that He might give, and you receive.

What is it that you are hungering for? How are you working for it? Today Jesus would turn you and your appetite to Himself. Which doesn't mean to stop doing those things you do in your life - but that He will fill them with new meaning, with new purpose. For filled with Him and satisfied, you will not look for what you do in your life to satisfy, you will be satisfied in what you do, in your vocation, whatever that may happen to be. Because you will no longer be chasing something you may never catch, but receiving what is better.

That is what Jesus was teaching the crowds when they asked Him: ***“What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”*** Wrong question, right? Focused on what they must do! So Jesus turns it around: ***“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”***

That phrase really has a double meaning: for faith really is the work of God - if He didn't give it, we wouldn't have it. But then also second, the work of God is for us not to work at all! But to believe. To believe in him whom he has sent to work for us. To cling to our Saviour and receive His work and gifts. To receive His Word, to receive His washing, to receive His forgiveness, to receive His Supper. To rest from our labors on the day of rest and be served, by the One whom came to serve us.

Many today, like the crowds then, think that's not enough. There must be something we can do - *must* do - as if faith and believing is too easy. And so the crowds asked for a sign. Many today want signs as well. And so Jesus points to the sign we have been given - Himself. He is the sign of God's love. He is the One who has come down from heaven to do the work we could never do in defeating sin, death, and the devil. He is the bread of life baked in the fiery furnace of God's wrath against sin on the cross, and then, like manna, laid on the ground in death that we may eat of Him and live. And risen from the dead, He is now the bread of life preached from pulpits and laid on altars, to feed us today. To feed us each day. That each day our life flow from this altar, and back to this altar. That each morning we rise from sleep like a little resurrection, remembering the resurrection that is ours in Holy Baptism, and depend on Him for what we need that day. The Word, the forgiveness, the life, the strength, we need. Each day, what we need. Each day, to turn our appetites to Him. That we may live. Doing what is set before us each day not in a hungry chase, but in satisfied faith.

And eating this bread of life, we do not digest this bread and make it part of us -

this bread digests us and makes us part of Him. **We grow up**, as St. Paul said, **in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.**

So come and eat this bread and live!

Come and get it with your ears and eyes and mouths and hearts!

Come and receive what your Saviour brings.

For He brings forgiveness for you.

He brings peace for you.

He brings life for you.

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.

*(Thanks to the Rev. Lloyd Gross for some of the thoughts and direction for this sermon, and to Rev. Bill Cwirla for his wonderful thought, that "the bread of life is baked for us on the cross!")*