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Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Food that Builds the Church”

Text: John 6:35-51; Ephesians 4:17 - 5:2; 1 Kings 19:1-8

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

There’s a show I’ve watched a few times, on the History Channel, called *The Food that Built America*. Maybe some of you have seen it. It talks about how we got some of the food we have today that we take for granted. Like having fresh orange juice in the supermarket, chicken sandwiches like Chick-Fil-A, frozen pizza, and my favorite, chocolate bars. These things weren’t around just a couple generations ago, and there were significant challenges for the people trying to figure out how to provide these things for people across the country. And now we all have these things, and we can’t imagine how we lived without them.

Today, Jesus continues *His* program and teaching on **the food that builds the Church**.

We started hearing about this last week with our first reading from John chapter 6. Jesus had just fed over 5,000 people out in a desolate place with just five loaves of bread and two fish. But the people don’t understand what Jesus did. They’re thinking with their stomachs and are just hoping for more free lunches. So Jesus begins to teach them. Catechize them about the food He has come to provide. That yes, God provides us with our daily bread, as He did with Moses and the manna in the wilderness, and as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. But that food can only take you so far, give you so much life. The people in the wilderness who ate the manna died, but Jesus has come to provide food that gives eternal life. Bread that, as we heard today, ***one may eat of it and not die***. **The food that builds the church**.

That’s pretty important bread, seems to me.

But I think we’re sometimes like the people in Jesus’ day, who were thinking with their stomachs. In that when we think about the church and building the church, we may not think about **the food that builds the church**, but about more earthly things, more earthly ways to build the church. Like, we need to have a really good youth program. Or we need to have really good music that people like. We need to be active in the community. We need to be exciting. And while those things are good, and maybe even helpful to a degree, other groups and organizations can do them as well, maybe even better than we. *They are not what builds the church.*

There are other ideas out there as well, about how to build the church, and *these* are not good; they are even harmful to the church. Like, we need to talk about sin less and instead make people feel good about themselves. We need to talk less about the cross and more about what people need to do to be good Christians. We need to give them advice on how to improve their lives here and now. That's what people want and want to hear. And maybe so. But *that is not what builds the church.*

But maybe before we go any farther, I need to clarify something: what do I mean by the church? Well, I *don't* mean a church *building* filled with people. That might be a church, but it might not. All those things I just mentioned, how some people today think about building the church, might fill a building, might draw a lot of people, but why? Why are they coming? What are they hearing? What is the focus? Is the focus on the here and now, or on the eternal? Is the focus on me, or on Christ crucified? What is being built - an earthly kingdom or a heavenly one?

Now, again, its not wrong to want to help people in their daily lives. That's a good thing, and we will be with the Community Food Drive we are doing. And St. Paul talked about that in the Epistle we heard today. To be imitators of God, to walk in love. And Jesus did that when He healed people and fed them. But the healing and the feeding are not why Jesus came. He fed them with the bread of earth *so that* He could feed them with the bread of life. He healed them of their sicknesses and diseases *so that* He could heal them of their sin with His forgiveness. The Son of God became man *so that* He could lay down His life on the cross for the life of the world.

For, Jesus said, ***this is the will of my Father***, not that we have a good and comfortable life here for a while, ***but that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*** And for that we need **the food that builds the church.**

For I worry that not just people "out there," but we, too, too often think with our stomach. That we, too, too often focus on the daily bread of this life rather than the daily bread of eternity. 'Cuz it's so easy to do! There are things I have to get done. Things I want to accomplish. Deadlines to meet. Obligations to fulfill. People counting on me. All true. And important. But if that takes over your life . . . If that is your life . . . That's the danger, you see. That we get so focused on our lives here and now, that we never quite get around to, we never seem to have enough time for, **the food that builds the church.**

And by church I mean . . . *you!* For the church is the congregation of saints, that is, holy people, that is, people *made* holy not by their own actions or goodness, but by the forgiveness of their sins. **The church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel (or Christ crucified for the forgiveness of our sins) is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered** (AC VII). That is, where that forgiveness of Christ is given.

And that's what Jesus was teaching today. He had just given them their earthly bread; now He wants to give them heavenly bread. He wants to give them **the food that builds the church**, which is Himself and His gifts. And so, He says, ***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.***

Now, there has been no small amount of disagreement among Christians over the years, as to whether John 6 is talking about Jesus giving us His flesh, His Body and Blood, in the Lord's Supper, or if He is simply talking about us receiving Him by faith, a *figurative* eating. To which I say: **yes**. It is not one or the other, but both. In this chapter there are words that speak of faith, as we heard today when Jesus said: ***Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.*** But there are also words that speak of eating Jesus' Body and drinking His Blood. They are not contradictory or exclusive. It is **both**. It is faith in Jesus' words and promises that lead us to receive Him and His gifts at the Table. But receiving the Supper without faith does us no good. And as I said last week, we feast on Jesus' words and Gospel, we feast on Jesus' forgiveness, and we feast on His Body and Blood. Jesus is lavish with His gifts, with His **food that build the church**.

And we give thanks for it *all*. That we can feast on His words and promises not just on Sunday when we come to church, but *everyday* as we read or hear His Word of life and are fed with bread of life. We can feast on Jesus' forgiveness *everyday* as we forgive one another, and instead of beating each other up and beating each other down, we lift each other up, feeding with bread of life. And then, of course, when we come here to this altar, receiving most personally and most intimately Jesus' very Body and Blood, *the* bread of life. And in all these ways we are holied, strengthened, fed, and nourished, with food *even greater* than Elijah received. For this food lasts not just 40 days and 40 nights, but gives us life that never ends. **Food that builds the church**. That strengthens the Church Militant here, and readies us for the Church Triumphant in eternity.

This is the food Jesus *came down from heaven* to give to you. The *Jews grumbled* about that, as we heard. They thought Jesus couldn't possibly have come down from heaven! They knew who He was, *the son of Joseph*. And He is, but more than that, too. He is *true man, born of the virgin Mary*, yes. But before that, *true God, begotten of His Father from eternity* (Small Catechism, Explanation of the Second Article of the Creed). And for us, too, there is more. Words are more than just words, water is more than just water, and bread and wine is more than just bread and wine. For as in Jesus the human and the divine come together, so in these means the earthly and the heavenly come together. And there is bread of life. Bread with the forgiveness, life, and salvation from Jesus and His cross. **Food that builds the church**, baked and served from the kitchen of the cross.

Maybe we take it for granted, this feast we have. Like we take our orange juice, Chick-Fil-A, and chocolate bars for granted. But just as there were significant challenges for the

people trying to figure out how to provide those things for people, so too for our feast - this was not easy! It took the very Son of God going to the cross for you. Bearing your sins and the sins of all the world, being condemned to death by man and by God, and dying that you can live. Dying to provide you with this food. Food that we not only cannot *imagine* living without, but that we *actually* cannot live without! Food without which we die eternally.

So what Jesus wanted that crowd to know, and what He wants you and I to know, is that this is **the food that builds the church**. This is the food that forgives your sins. This is the food that gives you new life. Life that will never end. ***I am the bread of life***, Jesus said. ***If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever***. For Jesus' flesh is not dead flesh, but flesh that is risen and alive. And all who eat it, in faith, will be the same - risen and alive, with Jesus, in eternity. And with this promise and assurance of *eternal* life, we are free to live a new life now, a Christ-like life, like Paul described.

For that's who you now are. That's what Jesus and His food - **the food that builds the church** - has made you. Come and eat and live!

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.