

Sermon Lent 4 2021

March 14, 2021

John 6:1-15

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson which was previously read.

I think it's common for us in the New Testament Church, for us as Christians seeing the fulfillment of God's promises in the resurrection of Jesus, I think it's common for us to look at the Israelites and sort of shake our head. Look at them in the lesson for today. Here they are in the wilderness. God rescued them from their slavery under Pharaoh. And think about what that entailed. By that I mean both the slavery and the rescue. For the slavery, it was backbreaking. We see that Pharaoh at a point made them not only build things but punished them with more severe work in the creation of the bricks. For the rescue we see that they witnessed the Glory Cloud, saw God's presence with them as they left Egypt, then they saw God work His miraculous power in parting the Red Sea. God was clearly with them. And yet, what do they say in the reading that we had for this morning?

“Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” “Moses, we would rather have stayed under that backbreaking work than have been rescued.” And why? “Because we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full! Because we were able to have our bellies filled.” If you're familiar with Paul's writings, you might remember in his letter to the Philippians he refers to enemies of Christ by saying, **“Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”** That's the Israelites, here isn't it? Their god is their belly. They have their mind set on earthly things. They would rather live under the burden of tyranny and have their meat pots than live in the wilderness and have provision from the Lord. And we see it again and again in that time. All of the things that they witnessed and yet they grumble and grumble and grumble. God has mercy and provides, and they rebel.

And it continues even to our Gospel lesson. Look at the end of that lesson. Here in that Jesus has fed these five thousand men, and Matthew tells us it's women and children in addition to that, so even more than five thousand. Jesus has fed them,

and—I guess we could say to their credit—what do they want to do? They want to make Him their king: **“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.”** At least there’s recognition of Jesus’ being kingly and worthy of honor, but why? Because He fed their bellies. Their god is their bellies, and they want to serve that god. They think if they make Jesus king, He’ll make sure to keep filling their bellies. Just like the Israelites in the wilderness, they want their meat pots.

Now, it might seem like this is a bit unfair as I’m making the comparison. To be sure, they’re not grumbling, they’re not whining, at least not in this section, they want to recognize Jesus. So, what’s the problem? Well, you see, if you read all of John Chapter Six, you find Jesus almost alone except for His disciples at the end of it. In this chapter, He gives a long discourse about how He is actually the bread of life. He describes how if you want to live, you must eat His flesh and drink His blood. And by the end of it the people have left. That sounds grotesque, right? Of course, they’re missing the point, but our point is that when this became more than just being about filling their bellies they were nowhere to be seen. Their minds were on the earthly things.

As I started today, I made the note that it’s common for us to shake our head at all of this. And on the one hand, rightly so. The idolatry the Israelites show in the desert, the unfaithfulness the crowd shows in John Six, that’s deplorable. It’s sinful and deserves recognition for its failing.

But as we do this, we need also to look into our hearts and examine them. Like Jesus says, we so often have that ability to seek to take the speck out of our brother’s eye, but fail to see the log in our own. Where are the logs in our eyes?

I think as we look around they are abundant. We show ourselves to still have those lingering dedications to the world and our bellies. Of course, as we speak of our bellies being our gods, we likely think that’s not much the case. And I think that’s hard for us to recognize in those terms because our bellies are full most of the time and we aren’t worried where our next meal is coming from. But how much do we have our minds set on earthly things? And to be sure, we can speak according to the gospel here and note that we know that this will always be the case. We know that our allegiances will always be at war within us, and there needs to be that struggle against sin. We know that we are, as we as Lutherans say, *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously justified and sinner, but that sinner in us needs to die in our

repentance. We need the new life in Christ and His mercy, and the old life needs to be drowned in baptismal waters.

To that point, we need to examine ourselves. And I think the pandemic has brought great opportunity for this. You know, it appears that we're sort of seeing a light at the end of the tunnel with this. We're certainly not done yet, but it seems that things are improving. And so, as they do, where will we align in the return to normal? Or even until that normal returns will we continue to rest in Christ or in this world?

Think about how we've responded in the midst of this. Things like toilet paper being gone and food hoarding happening in places. Where has our hope been? Has this driven us to prayer and repentance or worry and anxiety? Or as we are *simul iustus et peccator*, a little of both?

Or as we see the vaccine coming along, where is our hope? Is it in the vaccine injected into our arms by Pfizer, or Moderna? Or is it in the vaccine from our sin in Christ's body and blood? And as I say that I want to be clear, I'm not saying don't get the vaccines. Also, there have been movements in the Church in this time that wanted name Jesus as our vaccine for Covid, and therefore, they could just believe and they wouldn't get sick. That is not and never has been what I have preached. I have preached faith and trust in Christ and His will in the midst of this but never to the exclusion of our care for our neighbor nor to the expectation that we would not get sick. If I was not clear in that and so have been misunderstood I apologize, but I've only sought to make the point I'm making now, the body and blood of Christ is our vaccine for what truly ails us: sin. And our concerns are toward His Kingdom.

This is hard to grasp, because when the Gospel is preached it can sound like there's no care for the things around us. But the Law tells us what life in this world is and that grounds us in understanding how we are to relate and care for our neighbor and this world. But the Gospel draws our hearts to hope in Christ and Him alone.

You see our hearts are idol factories and they are constantly redirecting us away from that. That's like I said on Wednesday, Jeremiah tells us that those hearts are deceitful above all things and desperately sick. That sinful nature still clings to the things of this world and deceitfully so. It draws us to make our bellies our gods. It draws us to want to make Christ a Bread King who fills those bellies, if we make Him King at all. But as we look at the depth of this lesson of Christ feeding the Five Thousand, we see something so glorious in the midst of it. **And when they had eaten**

their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.

This word there for eating their fill has a connotation of being satisfied, of being full to satisfaction. That and the word there for leftover fragments, that’s the fragments of abundance. You see, Christ gives us the filling of abundance. In fact, the twelve basketsful points to that even more. I’ve mentioned this in preaching about this lesson before, but twelve is symbolic. It’s symbolic of the Church. There were the Twelve Tribes of Israel and the Twelve Apostles. There is such a fill from Christ that it’s an abundance for the Church. And to continue to give us understanding, those baskets themselves are interesting too. You see, apparently those baskets were the type used by the Jews at that time if they were entering into a Gentile area. They would store their food in the baskets, such that it would be protected from desecration, protected from becoming unclean. In other words, the baskets protected holiness.

You are Christ’s Church, you are protected in His blood, you are made holy in Him and your holiness is protected in Him and in the basket of His Church. His protection, His care for you is an overabundance filling you to satisfaction.

Christians, we need to stop making Him a Bread King and find that filling of His abundance, because it’s there. You see the lack we might feel, or the fear we might have in anxiety, or the draw of the things of this world, even the hunger in our bellies, that won’t satisfy us. We chase and we chase after all these other gods, but they won’t fill us. Only He as the Bread of Life will.

And as I speak of Him in that way think about how He already has filled you. His mercy has filled you with His Holy Spirit in baptism, His absolution has filled and cleansed your guilty conscience, and His body and blood fills you at His rail. He is the Bread of Life, know that abundance and that filling. Know that and repent of your draw to false things.

Because, you see we all do it. We all are those Israelites in the desert, we’re all those in the crowd at the mountain. We’re all those would make Him a King who fills our bellies. But His satisfaction is so much more than that, it is the forgiveness of all sin, even that idolatry and finally the filling of the Bread of Life forever and ever. Amen.