

Grace Lutheran Church
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11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 8, 2021
Sermon: "Vitamin B[read]" (John 6:51)
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

Gospel: John 6:35, 41-51

³⁵Jesus said to [the crowd,] "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ⁴¹Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴²They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" ⁴³Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Every so often in life we come up against a stumbling block, something that gets in our way and stops us in our tracks. It's not that there isn't a way forward. We just can't see it at the time. All we can see is the huge block in our way. We can't adjust our mind to see possibilities for how to move past it. So we stand there, perplexed.

"Perplexed" is a good word to describe the crowds in today's Gospel. (And whenever we hear of the people or the disciples it is always addressing us, because the Bible is God's living Word and finds us wherever we are.) Why are they perplexed? Because Jesus had told them he is the true bread from heaven. They don't know what to make of this. Until now they've been thrilled by all that he's done, things that made sense to them – healings, the loaves and fishes, things they could see and grasp.

Now they up against a stumbling block. When they hear the phrase "bread from heaven" all they can relate it to is what they know—the story in Exodus of the manna that fell from heaven and sustained their ancestors in their wilderness journey. Now they're hearing Jesus say he is the true bread from heaven. They have no idea what he is talking about. So they begin to complain, and you know what happens when people who are of the same mind all start to

complain to one another: things snowball. It's quite possible that, between verses 42 and 43, the situation is about to get completely out of hand. Until Jesus intervenes.

The way past a stumbling block is to find a way to break through your former frame of reference and can see things in a new way. This is what Jesus is trying to do for the people. "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness," he explains, "and they died." The manna fed the people only temporarily. Eventually they died of old age, illness, or whatever. He then goes on to shatter their former frame of reference: "This [gesture] is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die."

Eat something, and not die? Does this ring a bell in pop culture?

Isn't this the way of thinking behind the waves of vitamin crazes that that keep washing over us year after year? Of course we want to live as long as possible. We don't want to die, we don't want to think about dying, and...if we can just hit on the right combination of vitamins...maybe we won't die! I admit to taking quite a few vitamins every day. My regimen includes extra B vitamins, the "building blocks of a healthy body," because I have heard these nutrients promote energy, brain function, and cell metabolism. But in doing research for this sermon I learned that excessive amounts of certain B vitamins--including ones ones I've been taking--can build up in the body and become toxic. Now there is a stumbling block between me and my vitamins. How do I really know which help and which hurt? I am perplexed.

I found the way out, along with the clue to the crowd's perplexity, in this sentence from an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association: "There would be no controversy about the role of vitamin use in health and disease if all health professionals and those whose commentary on health matters is addressed to the public were to adhere to facts rather than promoting sensational anecdotes."

Adhere to facts.

Concerning our health, what are the facts? What do we know to be true? That eating a balanced diet according to the Healthy Eating Pyramid, which you can find on our Facebook page, is the best path to good health.

Concerning Jesus, what are the facts? What do we know to be true? That he is the living bread which brings us the eternal life that even the best diet cannot. We know this is true because he said it: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever."

In the agricultural society of first-century Israel, bread was the most essential food for survival. Without bread people would die. Without the bread the angel gave Elijah, he would have died, just as the bread Elijah had told the widow of Zarephath to go and make saved her and her son from starvation. Without the bread Jesus gives for the life of the world, which he explains is his flesh—his body, his very life—we would die, meaning that when it's over it's really over, that there would be nothing for us in this existence beyond the material world.

When Jesus says, “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh,” he is revealing that he will actually give up his flesh, on the cross; and he promises that it will be for the life of the world—life, meaning the fullness of life we have in him not only forever but also right now. In his death and resurrection Christ conquered death. He beat death! This sets us free from the power that Satan formerly had over us, the power that feeds on the fear of death, that impulse which keeps us living in fear and making self-centered decisions at the expense of the well-being of others, because Satan tricks us into believing that our life right now is all we have, and so we must preserve ourselves at all costs. This is the great deceit! This is the big lie!

And just as Christ through his death was raised by God in the power of the Spirit to new life, he promises that we shall be raised to new life as well. This promise frees us to live, and to love, and opens before us the fullness of eternity in the present. Eternal life is ours in Christ—now and forever.

John’s entire Gospel is directed toward this truth. And we receive this promise again, and again, wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name. His brand of Vitamin B, “Vitamin Bread,” provides all the nutrition we will ever need.

Amen.