

**Grace Lutheran Church**  
**Third Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2022**  
**Pastor Nancy M. Raabe + “What is Bread?”**

Awhile back, I think it was in a Parish News article, I quoted the star player on the fictional Ted Lasso’s soccer team saying exuberantly, “Football is life!”

Each of us could say this about that for which we care deeply. Music is life! Worship is life! Running is life! Books are life! Theater is life! Dogs are life! What we are saying is that this is what brings our life meaning. It is what floods our heart with joy, gives us hope, and nourishes us in the deepest way, nourishment being that which feeds our soul, strengthens our spirit, and enables us to be renewed as we move from one day into the next.

If we are talking specifically about feeding, I think we have to agree on this: “Bread is life!”

Bread is the most basic substance on which human civilizations have relied for 10,000 years. It was central to the formation of the earliest human societies. Starting in the Fertile Crescent, the domestication of wheat led to the formation of towns, as opposed to nomadic cultures, and from there to more sophisticated ways of being in community.

The earliest bread was made by crushing grain to produce something like chapatis in Indian food or tortillas in Mexican cuisine. And by the way, beer apparently came into being not long after, since almost any grain containing certain sugars can undergo spontaneous fermentation due to wild yeasts in the air. I even read that “The invention of bread and beer has been argued to be responsible for humanity’s ability to develop technology and build civilization.” Of course, beer flowed freely in the Luther household as master brewer Katie Luther kept her husband and all his students and colleagues well supplied. Can we credit beer for the Protestant Reformation?

But we are getting slightly off track. Back to bread. Baking bread remains one of humankind’s most essential activities. There is nothing that says “love from the heart” like a fresh loaf of homemade bread.

Here in Isaiah 55, the prophet has grabbed his megaphone and is calling to us down through the ages to come and feast on what God has already prepared for us, which is there for the taking -- water, wine, milk, but especially bread.

The historical context is that Isaiah is summoning the exiles back to their homeland, back to the land flowing with milk and honey, calling them to partake of all with which God in his great mercy has provided them. But what are we to make of this? We are not returning from exile, and Isaiah is not summoning us to start a feeding ministry--to give bread. God has already done that. We are being called to receive bread. So we can hear his call as a spiritual summons: “Ho, all of you! Listen up, even you that have no money (in other words, you who think you’re not worthy)! Come and eat!”

What this means for us becomes clear in the question that follows: “And you who do have money, why do you spend it on that which is not bread?” In other words, why do you exhaust yourself on that which does not truly feed you?

This is not a shopping choice, white vs. whole grain. Isaiah is calling for us make a decision about how we choose to live. What nourishes us? What drains us? And what is our role in providing for our own nourishment? In other words, what IS bread?

I want to suggest that bread is the way we can choose to think about literally everything. It is the way of thinking that removes us from our instinctive position at the center of the universe, that perspective from which we immediately evaluate everything that happens in terms of what we think about it. Bread rejects this and places us in solidarity with God’s entire created order. Bread rejects the self-centeredness that is hardwired into each of us by the survival mechanism common to every living creature, and invites instead into to share in the earth’s sufferings. Bread invites us into compassion--com, with, and passion, suffering. Bread is compassion.

But I am already a compassionate person, you say. Yes, you are. But bread calls us to consciously address that impulse to interpret everything in light of our place at the center of the universe, a hard-wiring so basic to our being that most of the time we don’t even notice it. Here are some examples from my own experience:

- I am standing in a long line at the grocery store at 5 p.m. as the person up in front is having trouble making their card work at the register. Grrrr! How inconsiderate of them not to be better prepared as I am trying to get home to make dinner!
- I am sitting in my car on Cowpath waiting through endless light changes at Vine creeping your way up the road to work. Grrr! Why can’t the Borough fix this light so it’s better for those like me on Cowpath, which is clearly the busier and more important street? (I actually wrote the Borough’s Public Works manager about that last summer. He responded very kindly, we’re working on it.)
- A person makes a remark that really hurts, or at least, that’s how I take it. Grrr! How could that person have said such a thing to me? Who do they think they are?

We can’t change these situations. Things we can’t control are always going to happen. But we can change our response to them. We can come down off our high and mighty pedestal, from which we customarily evaluate everyone and everything, and become one of the crowd, and stand alongside humanity in its trials and tribulations.

- That person up at the register, maybe they are having trouble with their SNAP benefits card; if so, say a prayer for their life, that they are able to provide for their family, and that they will find a good job that may enable them to come off the assistance.
- The long light changes, instead of getting all worked up about it, think about all those cars lined up both directions. Who are those people, what is their day like, where are they trying to get to, and how are they finding the patience to creep forward ever so slowly?

- The person who made the hurtful remark, reflect on what in their own life may have prompted them to say such a thing. Maybe they were clueless, in which case you can just let it go, or if it was intentional you can pray for them as perhaps they do not know the kind of love on a daily basis that we enjoy from your own family or the love that we know always comes to us from God, no matter how badly we misinterpret or mess up.

In our life in the church, bread is about who we worship, how we receive that as nourishment, and how we pass along to others that increased well-being. Do you worship God and put the garment of Christ as the compassionate concern for God's creation? If so, you *will* find the God for whom the psalmist eagerly seeks in Psalm 63.

Or do you worship that which gives you glory--money, power, fame, control, conquest? If so, the roadway of your life will be littered in your wake with dead leaves, twigs, branches and ultimately bodies, because these self-centered concerns bring death, not life.

So today, every day, every chance you get, choose bread. Receive that which nourishes, which we know the grace that God extends to each of us in unlimited supply through Jesus Christ.

"Incline your ear, and come to me," Isaiah beckons. "Listen, so that you may live."