

1 Kings 19:4-8

4 Elijah himself went farther on into the desert a day's journey. He finally sat down under a solitary broom bush. He longed for his own death: "It's more than enough, Lord! Take my life because I'm no better than my ancestors." 5 He lay down and slept under the solitary broom bush.

Then suddenly a messenger tapped him and said to him, "Get up! Eat something!"

6 Elijah opened his eyes and saw flatbread baked on glowing coals and a jar of water right by his head. He ate and drank, and then went back to sleep. 7 The Lord's messenger returned a second time and tapped him. "Get up!" the messenger said. "Eat something, because you have a difficult road ahead of you." 8 Elijah got up, ate and drank, and went refreshed by that food for forty days and nights until he arrived at Horeb, God's mountain.

Ephesians 4:25—5:2

25 Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, Each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor[a] because we are parts of each other in the same body. 26 Be angry without sinning.[b] Don't let the sun set on your anger. 27 Don't provide an opportunity for the devil. 28 Thieves should no longer steal. Instead, they should go to work, using their hands to do good so that they will have something to share with whoever is in need.

29 Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. 30 Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. 31 Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. 32 Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

5 Therefore, imitate God like dearly loved children. 2 Live your life with love, following the example of Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. He was a sacrificial offering that smelled sweet to God.

John 6:35, 41-51

35 Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

41 The Jewish opposition grumbled about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

42 They asked, "Isn't this Jesus, Joseph's son, whose mother and father we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

43 Jesus responded, "Don't grumble among yourselves. 44 No one can come to me unless they are drawn to me by the Father who sent me, and I will raise them

up at the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets, And they will all be taught by God.[a] Everyone who has listened to the Father and learned from him comes to me. 46 No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God. He has seen the Father. 47 I assure you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that whoever eats from it will never die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

We're now deep into the bread of life discourse, that expanse of John 6 where Jesus acts and speaks into being his identity as the Bread of Life. Two weeks ago we saw how God cares so deeply for the world that Jesus fed thousands of hungry people, and through that sign/act calls the church to feed the hungry on his behalf. Last week we witnessed how the bread from heaven, Jesus Christ, equips us for unity and ministry in the present and future. Where do we go from here?

Where else but the cross and the communion table? We've talked about the physical feeding of tangible bread. We've talked about the spiritual feeding that guides us in ministry today. So today we focus upon that place, that event, that presence that connects these physical and

spiritual realms. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus, those events that tie together our worldly bread with the bread of life.

We do this because, as we talk about the mission of feeding the world, and as we talk about the future of the church here at CLC, we must remember what makes that all possible. The work of the cross opens to us the possibility of new life. The work of the cross inspires us to love the world despite the world's denial of our faith, because Jesus loved the world even as the world denied him.

As we talk about eternal life, though, Jesus uses some images that, at least for me, seem difficult. Not just difficult to understand, but difficult to overcome. We hear that those who eat the bread of life will "never die," that they will "live forever," that this bread is his "flesh." We know all too well the grief of death in this world, that no one seems to live

forever without first facing death. And any talk of eating flesh should, well, make us think twice.

Of course, this isn't the first time we've heard Jesus make such radical declarations. Just a few verses earlier in Chapter 6, Jesus promises that those who eat the bread of life will never hunger or thirst again. Yet, those of us who weekly participate in communion, who eat the Word of God through scripture reading, who consume the life of God through worship and service in the world, still experience worldly hunger. Our bellies still grumble. Our mouths still parch. We still experience life physically, including physical needs and physical maladies.

Yet, there's a reason Jesus talks about these things together. True death is a state of permanence, an irreversible lack of life. True hunger and thirst lead to death. These are not only interconnected images, but interconnected experiences. To hunger is to know death's

doorway. Jesus knows that these words, these promises to never hunger, to never die, shock and amaze the hearers, likely even offend us. That's because from an immediate perspective, it seems an empty promise to those of in the audience.

Of course, the promises of resurrection seemed empty to Jesus as well. As he prayed for the Father to "take this cup," to remove the cup of crucifixion, Jesus faced the imminence of emptiness. The promise of satisfaction seemed empty as he hung upon a cross and muttered, "I thirst." The promise that we might never die seemed cruel, even, as he cried out amidst his execution, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Even the bread of life experienced death at the hands of religious elite, of the politically empowered, of the rulers of this world. So how can we expect these words, the promise to live forever, to have meaning in our lives?

Here, on this table, is what St. Ignatius of Antioch refers to as the “medicine of immortality.” This comes from his letter to the church at Ephesus, which he wrote while being transported to Rome for execution in the Colosseum. His death was not only possible, it was all but assured. Even worse, he was condemned to capital punishment because he served as a bishop of the church. Ignatius was preparing to die for this Jesus who promised he would never die. And yet, literally riding to his death, he speaks of this meal, of this bread of life, as the medicine of immortality, and again in his words, the “antidote to prevent us from dying.” Ignatius opens us to the possibility that Jesus offers us an eternal perspective in the face of our immediate fears. Jesus uses hyperbole here to make a point, that eternal life extends well beyond our current experiences and needs.

The New Testament, and much early church writing, refers to bodily death as sleep. Did these early Christians just

do a poor job on autopsies? No! They spoke this way because Jesus changed the trajectory of life and death. Because of Jesus, our death is no longer a permanent state. It is not death as it was known before, because there is resurrection on the other side. New breath will expand our lungs, new strength gird our skeletons, new vibrancy will restore our fleshly bodies. It is sleep because, one day, when Christ returns in glory, we who eat the medicine of immortality, we have found and fed upon the bread of life is the antidote to death. This means that death will never have the last word.

Death will never be the last word. That's why we gather around this meal. Through this bread and wine, the Spirit of the Living God, the very life force of Jesus, enters our bodies again and again to prepare us for the resurrection, to solidify within our souls and our somas and our selves that death is a temporary state. That, in Paul's words, even as we

share in a death like Jesus', so too we will share in a resurrection like Jesus' as well.

One of the beauties of our faith, one that we all too often forget, is that we're called to embrace the mystery of God, and this bread of life is surely a mystery. Things like the One God yet Three Persons nature of the Trinity. Miracles Jesus performed. The resurrection of the dead. There are no sufficient rational arguments for these things, yet we hold them to be true. They are mysteries of faith that we believe because God's at work in us, inspiring faith and trust despite the fact that our finite human brains can't grasp the infinite divine reality. And that's not a dig at humanity! That's the grace of divinity, the wonder of our God, that Jesus not only accepts us but embraces us as those who can't fully understand everything and yet trust in the midst of the mystery.

One of the best ways to bask in this mystery is through poetry. Hear these words from Jacob of Serugh, a 5th century pastor whose sermons were masterfully composed as poetry. In his words, this eternal life that comes through this bread of life becomes a wonderful gift to behold rather than a problem to overcome.

***Jesus brake the bread and made it the Body, and gave
to His Apostles.***

***And the taste of the body, wherein was life, was in their
mouths.***

***From when he took it and called it Body it was not
bread but His body
and it (or Him) they were eating whilst they marveled.***

***They eat His body, and He is reclining with them at the
table,***

***and they drank His blood and they hear the voice of His
teaching.***

***They affirm that He is slain whilst they look upon him
alive and speaking,
and he is mingled with them whilst they eat him, without
doubt.***

***And faith is bright and stands valiantly,
and doubts not either that he is alive or that he is slain.***

***And he reclines slain at the table, and it is not
undoubted.***

***He, our Lord, is the High Priest and the perfect sacrifice
and therefore he sacrificed himself before the Father.***

He is the dead who when dead, was alive...

***He brake and divided His body with his hands to his
twelve,***

***who, if they had not seen how he brake, would not
have broken.***

Sometimes the best response we have to mystery are poetry, like these words for Jacob. They're mosaics,

compilations of tiles that put together a beautiful image of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who offers his flesh for the salvation for the world. Sometimes the best responses we have are art, something that speaks truth even in the abstract, even in the metaphor. Sometimes our best response to the unbelievable promise of God is the wondrous affirmation of what we hope is true, even if we can't fully believe it.

And so we gather today, trusting in Jesus' own words that, "This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that whoever eats from it will never die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Let's respond to that with wonder, with appreciation, with adoration, even if we struggle to believe it is true. Amen.