

Sermon for Sunday, August 4, 2024
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
"Bread of Life"
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa

[Scriptures for Sunday, 8/4](#)

Thirty-nine years ago this month, my son Owen was baptized. The baptism took place at the Episcopal church that my mother belonged to. At the time, we were living in Japan serving as LCA missionaries and we'd returned home to have our baby. The Priest, Father Pantel, was a very kind man, and even though we weren't members of his congregation, or even Episcopalians, he generously and enthusiastically welcomed us, and our new baby. When we met with him before the service, he explained what would happen during the service, and it was nearly identical to how we Lutherans do baptisms. But then he told us something that was a bit different, and it really surprised me. He explained that in some branches of the early church, infants were communed after they were baptized. The priest said that he believed in the full inclusion of children and even infants in Holy Communion. OK, I thought, but my baby's only two weeks old – so how does that work???? He explained that when we knelt at the altar rail, he would serve us the bread and wine, and then he would dip his finger in the wine and touch it to Owen's lips. And that's exactly what happened.

That experience opened my eyes to the radically inclusive nature of this meal we call the Lord's Supper.

If you saw my little blurb in the emailed *Good Shepherd Weekly News and Events* about "The Season of Bread," then you know that we are on Week 2 of a 5-week series of gospel lessons about bread – specifically about how Jesus is our bread of life. Last week we heard about the feeding of the 5000. Just now, we heard Jesus explaining to some of those folks who got a free lunch, and now wanted more, that the bread he gives them is so much more than physical nourishment. It is bread for the soul, the spirit, and the heart. The Bread of Jesus gives life in abundance, even life for eternity.

I love it that along with Jesus' teaching about the bread of life, we also get to hear the wonderful story of manna in the wilderness. There's such depth of meaning in that story. What I want to draw your attention to is the way that the bread is scattered around in the wilderness with carefree abandon. It's everywhere and anyone can go out and gather it. Are you doubting God's faithfulness? Doesn't matter, you go get your manna along with everyone else. Are you complaining about how good it was back there in Egypt and wishing you could return? That's OK, the manna is for you, too. Have you given up on Moses and Aaron and are looking for new leadership? Fine, you are still welcome to go and get your manna and enjoy it, along with some roasted quail. Are you a little bit greedy – not sure that there'll be manna again tomorrow? Well, even though you disobeyed God and hoarded some, you can still go out, along with everyone else, and gather up your daily bread. It didn't seem to matter if the people understood, or even respected, the nature of this gift of God or not. God just kept sending that manna every day, right

up until the day they made it to the promised land. The manna was everywhere, and it was for everyone.

Last week at VBS, the kids learned the parable of the seed and the sower. You remember how the sower, AKA the farmer, tossed the seeds into all these different places - like in the rocks, or beside the road, or in the weeds - and eventually some of the seed actually made it into the good soil? When we hear that story, we naturally want to be the good soil – we want the seed of God’s love to grow up in us and bear fruit. This month we’re even singing that story as our offertory song, “Lord, let my heart be good soil.” This is a beautiful prayer and a holy desire. But let’s see if something else is going on in that story – something that seems reminiscent of God’s profligate gift of Manna. Take a look at the behavior of the farmer who goes around scattering the seed in what can only be described as a careless manner. What kind of farmer scatters the seed among the rocks? “What kind of farmer throws the seed along the side of the road where it gets trampled underfoot? What kind of farmer tosses the seed among the weeds? What kind of farmer leaves the seeds lying around so that the birds can eat them? Only a farmer who has an endless and abundant supply of seeds is free to give that seed away in a reckless and indiscriminate manner. This Farmer is so eager to share that seed that she’ll go to any lengths and try every possible way to plant those seeds of love, even in our own stony hearts.

All of these stories reveal to us the lavish and incomprehensible extravagance of God’s love and grace and mercy. The Manna strewn about in the wilderness, the seeds scattered in the rocks and the weeds, the five little loaves that fed thousands, and then God’s own son - our beloved Jesus, holy and beautiful, Bread of Heaven - giving himself away for the life of the world.

It is a sad legacy that for hundreds, more than a thousand years, the church has put up all kinds of roadblocks to God’s generous gift of Holy Communion. This piece of furnishing that we call the Altar Rail started out as a fence to keep people out – people whom the church decided weren’t worthy. So countless numbers of God’s beloved were denied the very gifts that God so passionately desired to give them. God does not put up fences, or build walls, or discriminate between those who are worthy and those who aren’t. God welcomes all – no exceptions.

Each week this table is lavishly spread with the gifts of God ... the doors are thrown wide open ... and absolutely everyone is welcome. No matter who you are or where you have come from, there is a place for you here! All you have to do is open your hands to the experience of God's love. Taste the bread, enjoy the sip of wine or grape juice, and say thank you to the One who always provides more than enough, who welcomes everyone, and who sees at this table only beloved children.

