

**Sunday, August 4, 2024**  
**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13B)**

John 6.24-35

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1034858747534428>

*(Sermon begins at about 24:40)*

**“The Bread That Gives Life to the World”**

In today’s Gospel, we heard the beginning of what is sometimes referred to as the “Bread of Life Discourse.” This discourse spans the better part of the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel, which we will hear over the next four weeks. Yes, four weeks of “I am the bread of life.” The fact that Jesus spends so much time on this one image tells us, at least in John’s Christology—his theology on the nature and work of Jesus—that Jesus as “bread of life” is significant. This one image provides a key teaching on who Jesus really is and what he means for those of us who follow him. Today’s portion of that discourse, immediately following the feeding of the five thousand (which we discussed last week), sets the stage for the real teachings which follow. In a way, the portion we heard today is Jesus’ attempt to try to get those who come to him on the same page, so he can jump into the meat of the discourse. Right now, they are stuck on one thing and one thing only—bread. The bread he provided them the day before. They are not seeing that Jesus is about so much more than just someone who will give them bread on demand. You certainly see this played out in what transpires today.

The day after Jesus feeds five thousand people with all the bread and fish they want, some of those who had been at that miraculous event go in search of Jesus, and do eventually find him. While they do not specifically mention the events of the previous day, it is pretty obvious to Jesus why these people were looking for him: “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” He realizes that the people cannot see beyond him giving them food. They are not able to recognize God’s loving presence that was evidenced by the miracle. In effect, he is saying, “Yesterday, I gave you an absolutely awesome experience. I told you about the wonders of God’s love. I showed what that love is like when I healed all who were in need. And I gave you a big meal to boot. And all you remember, all you seem to care about, is the bread.” He goes on, as reported by John, to say “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” Little do they realize, Jesus has just told them exactly who he is and what he really has to offer. He is the Son of Man, and what he offers is more than bread. His ultimate purpose is to provide them with eternal life.

As he goes on, the people are starting to get it. Maybe? There is a brief interlude when they ask Jesus for guidance: “What must we do to perform the work of God?” Alright, good. They seem to be getting the message. He has gotten them off the subject of perishable bread and thinking more about that which is imperishable: the work that leads to eternal life. Now, just to be clear, when Jesus talks about eternal life, he is not talking about the concept of immortality or some future life in heaven. Rather, for Jesus, eternal life is a metaphor for living here and now in the unending presence of God. Jesus is not talking about a final destination, but rather a way of life.

While the crowd seems to be making some progress, there is still a bit of a disconnect. But at least they are open to learning, to bridging the gap. They even ask how to get on the right track: “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see and believe you?” They want to know how Jesus is going to help them develop the faith they need. And then they regress. Back to their obsession with bread: how Moses gave the Hebrews bread during their wilderness journey to the Promised Land. “Moses gave us bread, so what are you going to do for us?”

You can almost see Jesus doing a facepalm to the forehead. “Enough with the bread already!” But then it occurs to him. While they may be fixated on bread—the bread he gave them yesterday, and the bread from heaven that their ancestors ate in the wilderness—he can work with this. He can use bread as an image for, as a sign of, God’s presence in their lives. So, he reframes the manna story—part of the most significant and life-changing experience in their history—to demonstrate to them that they have already received what they truly need. He helps them to see that the manna, the bread they received in the wilderness, was more than just a means of physical sustenance. The daily supply of manna was a sign of God’s presence with them. The manna was a tangible sign of God’s love and compassion for his people; that God cared for the people in an ongoing way. They don’t need a sign of God’s presence. They have already experienced God’s presence. God’s live-giving presence.

Jesus tells them, “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Of course, as so often with Jesus’ words, there are multiple layers to this statement. One layer, one understanding, that meets the people where they are right now; and another layer, a deeper understanding, which is where Jesus hopes to lead the people. The layer that speaks to the people where they are right now is the more literal one about bread—the bread they have been obsessing about. That yes, they do indeed experience God’s presence in the bread they have received. The bread, be it manna or the bread they had the day before, being life-giving, providing for their physical needs.

The deeper meaning of his statement, “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” is provided in the person of Jesus himself. His actions, such as multiplying loaves and fishes to feed five thousand people, along with other such miracles, are only signs of the deeper truth, the deeper reality, of who Jesus is. That he is the One who comes down from heaven to give life to the world. Giving life in a variety of ways through the totality of his mission and ministry. Certainly giving life in healing the sick and infirm and in casting out demons. In some cases, saving their lives, and in others, improving the quality of their lives in significant ways. In a couple of instances, literally giving life through the raising of those who had died. He also gives life through his preaching and teaching, providing new and deeper insight and understanding of how God operates in the world, and how those who follow him are called to be a part of God’s kingdom. Giving life through his example of faithfully living according to God’s laws.

Of course, the ultimate means of Jesus giving life to the world is through his death and resurrection, whereby he defeated the bonds of sin and death. Providing for the forgiveness of our sins and for our ultimate salvation. Opening the way for new and eternal life in him. Eternal

life with him beginning in this life, living in the ongoing presence of God, but also extending to eternal life in the age to come.

Jesus wraps all of this up in one simple, yet deeply profound image: “I am the bread of life.” Creating an image that takes the immediate concern of those who come to him—their desire for bread—and giving it a broader and deeper meaning. A way to help them grow in their understanding of who he is and what he is really about. He continues with an invitation: “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Physically, as well as spiritually. Bringing together the multiple meanings of his life and ministry in a way that his audience—focused more on the immediate, physical need—can begin to hear and understand. In an image and in a way that they can begin to relate to their own lives and circumstances. The more immediate need being met, allowing for reflection on the deeper and more spiritual needs that are also being met through him.

It is these multiple layers of meaning, the multiple ways of being fed and of giving and receiving life that are the root of our ministry as Church. We see this in our regular activities in the parish, through our worship experiences, which progress from the Liturgy of the Word where we are fed with the knowledge of who Christ is and explore what it means for us to be the Body of Christ; to the Eucharist, where we are literally fed with the bread of life, both physically and spiritually. Nourished for our ongoing work in God’s kingdom. We see this in our various parish functions, in which we are fed and nurtured physically with food, but also emotionally and spiritually as we gather in fellowship, supporting one another in our lives and ministries. Although the aspect of our communal life in which the image of Jesus as the bread of life is perhaps most evident in its fullness is through our ministry outside our walls. Through our outreach ministries.

Of course, we engage in outreach ministry in response to the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. One way we seek to do this by sharing God’s love with those who are most in need of experiencing it. Although, like those who came looking for Jesus the day after the feeding of the five thousand, it is hard to comprehend that God actually loves you if you are hungry, or unhoused, or without any of the other basic necessities most of us take for granted. You can talk about God’s love until you are blue in the face. But someone for whom even the most basic of needs go unmet is going to have a hard time believing God actually loves them. They just don’t experience that love in any tangible way. Which is where Jesus’ lesson of being the bread of life comes in. Where his example of being the bread of life, with its twofold meaning, comes in. First in providing for the immediate, physical need—the bread. The bread then becomes a tangible expression of love—our love for our neighbor and God’s love for them as demonstrated through our actions. Only then can that love, and the life of faith that grows from it, become a reality.

Jesus had a significant message for his original audience. A message of God’s love, of God’s presence in their lives, and of the new life that extends from that experience. But he first had to overcome the lack of understanding that resulted from their more immediate physical needs. As he listened to those who sought him out, he was able to see how their hunger for bread was also an image for a deeper hunger: the hunger to experience God’s loving presence. Something

he was uniquely able to provide in the flesh and through his ministry. Giving rise to an enduring image that encapsulates his broader message, his ultimate purpose.

Over the next few weeks as we more fully explore what it means for Jesus to be the bread of life, may we be open to how we, as members of the Body of Christ, are called to share this nurturing gift that gives life to the world.