

2014_11_27 Thanksgiving
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

1. Give us this day our daily bread
2. Give us this day the Bread of Life
3. Give us this day a heart which gives

INI

Today is a busy day. Maybe you've been planning for weeks, even months, for this day. You've worked hard to get everything ready. And finally you get to sit down. You sit down and look around the table to see the faces and food you love. It's Thanksgiving – a time to give thanks.

But do we ever stop to think – where did the food come from in the first place? Or the cranberries? Or the potatoes? Or the turkey? Where did it all come from? That good hearty, 12 grain, whole wheat loaf. Did it just fall from heaven onto our Thanksgiving table?

Well, lets think back. You were at the bakery on Tuesday. It began with the clerk who was just putting that freshly baked loaf of bread on the shelf. But before that, it was in the hands of the baker who was preparing the flour, wheat, yeast, and water; working the dough and sliding it into his warm oven where it rose and became the fine, hearty loaf of bread that you are about to eat. But before that, the miller was grinding the wheat into the flour that would be used for the recipe. But before that the farmer was working the field, breaking up the hard ground, sowing the seed, watching and caring for the crop as it grew and finally harvesting that golden head of the ripe grain which would become the flour that went into the bread that sits on your table today. So that loaf of bread didn't just fall from heaven? Or did it? You see, before all that, there was a seed...

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

1. Give us this day our daily bread – Exodus 16

Today we begin our three part sermon by explore the meaning of the fourth petition. We pray it in the Lord's Prayer every Sunday: "Give us this day our daily bread." But what does it mean? It is interesting that when Luther gives his explanation in the catechism, he doesn't focus on what God would give us through this prayer, but on what God would teach us through this prayer. When we pray in the fourth petition: "Give us this day our daily bread" we are acknowledging that God is the source of all good things. We are thanking Him. And not just for bread alone. By daily bread we mean everything we need for our bodily well-being. In these few words we are asking that God would teach us to receive all our daily needs with thanksgiving – "food, drink, clothes, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money and goods, a godly husband or wife, godly children, godly workers, godly and faithful leaders, good government, good weather, peace, health, education, honor, faithful friends, trustworthy neighbors – and things like that" (Fourth Petition, Luther's Small Catechism).

And it was just such things that the children of Israel had come to expect and to think they deserved. Exodus 16 tells the story of how God had freed Israel from slavery in Egypt until they find themselves now two months into the Arabian desert. And they are hungry. And they complain.

God has led them to a place where things are out of their control; where there is nothing left for them but to trust. And what they do? What do we do? We worry; we complain. We stop praying to give thanks and start praying to complain. Even though God has done great and marvelous things for us in the past – great miracles such as parting the Red Sea, giving us life, giving us His Son – we think it is up to us to fix things. With enough effort, we can get things back under control. And suddenly Egypt doesn't look so bad. They remember the pots of meat and loaves of bread. "Oh that we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt – at least we would die well fed."

So what does the Lord do? He sends bread from heaven. Indeed, as Luther's explanation to the fourth petition says, God gives daily bread without our asking, even to those who do not believe. Even to those who doubt and distrust God's goodness. Even to those who worry. Even to those who complain. Even to those who are not thankful.

Exodus 16:4–8,13–18,31

⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not." ...

¹³ So it was that ... in the morning the dew lay all around the camp. ¹⁴ And when the layer of dew lifted, there, on the surface of the wilderness, was a small round substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵ So when the children of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.

And Moses said to them, "This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat. ¹⁶ This is the thing which the Lord has commanded: 'Let every man gather it according to each one's need, one omer for each person, according to the number of persons; let every man take for those who are in his tent.' "

¹⁷ Then the children of Israel did so and gathered, some more, some less. ¹⁸ So when they measured it by omers, he who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack. Every man had gathered according to each one's need. ...

³¹ And the house of Israel called its name Manna. And it was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

It was bread from heaven. They had not plowed the field; they had not harvested the crop; they had not ground the grain; they had not baked the dough. It was bread from heaven. It was so unusually a thing that they named it "Manna" meaning "What is it?"

How unusual God's grace is. We work for our food and think we deserve what we have coming. But when suddenly things are out of our control, circumstances where we can do nothing to contribute to our security and safety, and God does it all – we are left saying, "What?" We are left with Manna.

For God gives daily bread – and clothing, shoes, house and property, money and goods, godly husband or wife, godly children, good government, good weather, peace, health, education, honor, faithful friends, and trustworthy neighbors – He gives all these things without our asking or deserving. But we pray in this petition that God would teach us to give thanks and be thankful in all the Manna He showers upon us.

For it is only by grace that the seed exists – we did not create it. It came from heaven. And it is only by grace that the seed is planted; that the seed grows; that the wheat is harvested, ground, baked, delivered, and that we have the money to buy that loaf of bread that sits on our table surrounded by the faces of those we love – it is Manna. God sends bread from heaven.

2. Give us this day the Bread of Life – John 6

Where did that seed come from in the first place? And how is it that from this one tiny seed a full grain of wheat can be produced? And how is it that this one stalk of grain would produce so many more seeds of grain? How is it that this little seed would become the loaf that sits on our table today. In this seed, God has placed the power to produce life. But it doesn't come without hard work. From the farmer putting in hours upon hours, working the field, watching and watering the crops, harvesting the grain; to the miller grinding that grain into flour; to the baker working the dough and baking the bread; to you working hard to earn the money to buy that bread – a loaf comes to find your table through hard work. It doesn't just fall out of heaven, does it?

This is what we are used to. Working hard for our daily bread. So when Jesus takes five loaves and two fish and feeds thousands of people, we are liable to respond: "What?" What is this Manna, and where can I get more of it?

They wanted more. Jesus had performed a great sign, from five loaves to five thousand mouths... Jesus had fed them all with left overs to spare. But still they wanted more. Even though their bellies were filled, the people were not satisfied. There is always more work to be done. Our stomachs are satisfied for only so long, then they will be hungry again. And so they seek out Jesus, wanting to make Him their king.

John 6:26–30

²⁶ Jesus answered them and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. ²⁷ Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."

²⁸ Then they said to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?"

²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."

³⁰ Therefore they said to Him, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' "

What they don't realize is that their problems don't have to do with having bread to eat at all. God gives daily bread without our asking, even to unbelievers. Their real problem is that even though their stomachs will never be satisfied. They are driven by discontentment and a false notion that they can if they can only satisfy their need for daily bread, their problems will be solved. But the problem that is not solved is that for all the bread from heaven God would rain down in all its abundance; however He

might fill our tables full of good things this Thanksgiving; we will still die in our sins. For this bread from below does nothing for our soul.

And because they aren't satisfied, God isn't satisfied. He had brought them bread from heaven. But our flesh will never be satisfied with such things. We will always want something more. Something better. And however much we work, labor day by day, we will never be able to do the works that will satisfy our needs or to give God what will satisfy His desires. So God must do the work. God must sow the seed. God must bring us living bread.

John 6:32–33,48–50

³² Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ...

⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead.

⁵⁰ This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world."

A seed is born. A seed sent from God, born of a woman, born of flesh, born under the law. And in Him, God has placed the power to produce life. But it doesn't come without hard work.

Think back. You are at church today, listening to a sermon, feeding on the Bread of Life. But first God had to place the power of the Spirit and life into that Word which You hear. But before that God had give rise to this new and unleavened loaf by raising His Son from the dead. But before that the Father had to sacrifice His only Son, so that the tender plant would wither and die for on the cross for our sins. But before that, the Son had to willingly labor for you, accepting the penalty of our sins and doing the works of God for us. But before that, there was a seed – a seed of hope that God had created, planned, and planted and in Mary He was conceived, born of flesh and blood, so that He could give His life for you. Yes before it all, there was a seed. And now it sits on our table, before us all, feeding you with God's forgiveness. We are liable to say: "What?" This living Manna sent from heaven is Jesus, and He has satisfied your every need and God's every desire for you. Whoever believes in Him, will never die and He will raise you up at the last day. And so we pray, "Give us this day the Bread of Life."

3. Give us this day a heart which gives – 2 Corinthians 8

The seed has come from God. Whether it is the seed in the ground which became the farmer's harvest which became the miller's flour which became the baker's dough which became the loaf that sits on your table today; or it is the seed of Christ which was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of a woman, given into the death of the cross, and born anew and living loaf in the resurrection – whether its daily bread or the Bread of Life, it has all come from God; a gift of His grace and a fruit of His doing. And together, we have thanksgiving. Daily bread; the Bread of Life together brings us together this thanksgiving – it means we sit together around the same table, at the same feast, sharing in the same riches, we lack nothing, we leave nothing leftover – it's thanksgiving. And so we pray, "Give us this day, a heart which gives."

It was because of the fruit of giving hearts that the congregations in Judea and Jerusalem would once again have food on their tables. A great famine had left the economy of Palestine devastated. But the fruit of thankful hearts would respond. The Greek calls it "koinonia" – as it says in Acts 2, "They had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods and divided it among themselves as anyone had need." They responded to the famine as a family of Christians, seated at one table, with but one common loaf to share. So Paul writes to the Corinthians, chapter 8...

2 Corinthians 8:8–9, 13–15

⁸ I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. ...

¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; ¹⁴ but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality. ¹⁵ As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack."

You see, in a sense this bread did fall from heaven. The offering collected by Paul to bring to Judea for the famine was sent from heaven. It was a fruit of giving hearts; a sharing of the riches of Christ. For only by feeding on the Bread of Life could they no longer count daily bread as their own. They had daily bread; they had the Bread of Life; and together all the fellowship of Christ sat at table together to give thanks for what God had given them. He who had much gave to him who had little. And there was equality. There was koinonia. It was just like the manna in the wilderness. So Paul quotes Exodus 16,

15 As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack."

The Lord rains bread from heaven. But what appeared to be a blessing was also intended as a test. It was a test of their sincerity as to whether they would receive their daily bread with thanksgiving.

No lack. No leftovers. One table. God has designed the fellowship of Christ so that we grace finds a table to be shared. No lack – meaning that God will provide for each Christian and for this ministry each according to what He determines right. And no leftovers – meaning that whatever lack appears to exist in one member's situation, God will supply through the abundance He pours out in another member's situation.

So God tests us. Maybe you are already aware of the financial strains our congregation is going through right now. We could so easily complain like Israel that things are not as comfortable for us as they were in the past. We could so easily doubt whether God will provide enough for us in the future. But God has no such concerns for our financial future.

His concern is for our hearts. And so He tests us. Perhaps He allows a lack in my life in order that I would trust in His goodness. Or perhaps He allows abundance in my life so that I might have the opportunity to share where others lack.

Nothing left over; nothing to lack. Like the Manna in the wilderness, we find ourselves a family that feeds together. Nothing left over means we don't need to stuff the extra scraps into a mattress somewhere when there is a need right here. Nothing to lack means when the well has run dry and we can't give what we once gave, the Lord will provide someone else to supply.

God has tested us. Both our lack and our abundance. And ultimately, the abundance belongs to us all. For we all sit at the same table; we all eat that same body and drink that same blood. And for all our selfishness and complaints, God showers forgiveness and grace. He gives us daily bread and He gives us the Bread of Life and together we have thanksgiving. In such a way, God teaches us to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving. And so we pray, "Give us this day a heart which gives."

15 As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack."

Today is a busy day. God has been planning weeks, months, years. He's worked hard to get everything ready. And finally we sit down to a table full of His blessings. From the seed which He created to bring us daily bread to the seed He conceived to bring us the Bread of Life to the seed which He has placed in your heart to believe and receive the riches of Christ's abundance. This is Thanksgiving – a fellowship which sits at table together to give thanks for what God has given. So sit down and together with the faces of those you love – give thanks that God has sent us bread from heaven.

Amen!