

John 6.1-15
Laetare, the 4th Sunday in Lent
11 March 2018
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Dateline: 18 August 1986. Somewhere in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area or the Quetico. Not quite sure if it's Minnesota or Canada. 5 days into a 7-day canoe trip. Have hit all the walleye holes the last 5 days and not a bite. No fish to eat. Wouldn't matter anyway. It's been raining the whole time. Pouring. And cold. Rain mixed with snow. In August, mind you. And when you're not in your tent shivering in a soaked sleeping bag, you're canoeing, soaked to the bone. And I'm starving. We all are. All our energy wiped out by paddling and shivering and paddling shivering again. No food left in our packs. Except this all-advised purchase made back in Ely: the loaf of brown hocky-puck dense bread we've been avoiding.

But when you're starving, you'll eat anything. And nothing ever tasted better than that. I don't care if you give me the best Kobi beef fillet mignon. It won't taste anything like that dense, rain-soaked bread.

When you're starving, you'll eat anything. And in the wilderness, gathered around Jesus, is another hungry troupe. Not the 6 guys in 3 canoes in the BWCA. But a massive crowd. 5,000 men, not counting women and children. And they're on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. Just as you are, during Lent.**

They've traveled a long time already. From all over the Northeast Mediterranean region from their scattered communities. And now they've gathered on a hilltop near the sea of Galilee. There *is* no room for them in the inn. Tonight, it'll be sleeping under the stars. And they're famished. Famished from the elements. The intense day-time heat; the frigid night-time temperatures. Famished from the endless walking day in and day out. Famished, because they didn't leave a home with a well-stocked pantry, like those of us in the BWCA had.

And when you're starving, you'll eat anything.

We know that. Mothers in Haiti feed their starving children dirt packed into tart pans. Because at least it fills their little bellies.

It doesn't taste like much. But just like I gained a taste for the hockey-puck dense bread in the BWCA, pretty soon you gain a taste for dirt.

And there they are. On a hill. Overlooking the lake. Not a McDonald's or a Sonic in sight. Not enough money between all of them to feed 5,000 men + women and children even if there had been. But there's plenty of grass. And under the grass, there's plenty of dirt.

And they know it. When you're starving, you'll eat anything. They know it.

But so does Jesus.

The other Gospel accounts of this event in Matthew and Mark tell us as much. Both of them say that Jesus looked at the crowds and “had compassion” (Mt 14.14; Mk 6.34).

But John actually puts Jesus’ compassion on display. A compassion that isn’t merely a feeling. But a compassion that issues forth in works. Jesus looks at the crowds. And then He looks at His disciples. And He asks them: “Where are we to buy bread, that these people may eat?” Because otherwise it will be dirt and grass. And in their hunger dirt’s gonna taste better to them than Kobi beef with a mushroom gravy.

Fortunately for me in 1986, the brown bread was packed with nutrients. It was good for me. It was the best thing I had ever eaten; and it was the best thing I could have eaten at the time. Protein and carbs. And I was warm and energetic in a flash.

But dirt never gives you what you need. In fact, the body starves. The skin becomes sallow. The abdomen bloated.

And at Passover AD 31 along the shores of Galilea, they didn’t need dirt. They needed food. Real food. Healthy food. Food that would strengthen them for their journey. Food that would warm their bodies when night fell.

And so with nothing but 2 fishes and five loaves of barely bread Jesus miraculously provided not just a snack, but an entire meal. Carbs and protein and fiber. Everything you could need. With enough left over to fill 12 baskets. One each for *every tribe* of Israel. Filled with miraculous bread. Filled with good food. Filled with true food. From the gracious hand of Jesus.

Now look, it’s not the case that you can take any old episode from the Gospels and do what I’m going to do next. But with this one you can. Because this whole business with the feeding of the 5,000, it goes on for the rest of chapter 6.

And in those 55 remaining verses, Jesus tells us *exactly* what this miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 men is all about. Plus women and children.

Yes. It’s all about His grace and providence. Yes. It’s all about “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.” Yes. It’s all about God’s goodness to all mankind in providing them their daily bread. It’s about all of that.

But it’s also about much more. It’s a deed of Jesus’ compassion that anticipates and points to and preaches the suffering of Jesus’ Passion. Because the compassion of God does not extend to this life only.

That’s what Paul says. “If we have hoped in Christ for this life only, we are to be more pitied than all men.” Instead, the compassion of God extends through this life to the next. It’s a compassion for those

whose hunger and thirst that has nothing to do with the body, but who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Who hunger and thirst to be right with God. And to live eternally accepted by the God who alone has power over life and death and over eternal life and death. A hunger and thirst that can be addressed in only two ways: either by you or by God Himself. And it's about food that doesn't give eternal life on the one hand, and food that does on the other. It's about labor and toil that leads to death. And about a gift that leads to life and life eternal. It's about filling up on all the wrong stuff and getting fed the best food you ever ate.

“Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life...,” Jesus goes on to say. For “the Bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6.27, 33).

Food that perishes and food that endures to eternal life.

There's plenty of bad food out there to beat down the hunger. Food that perishes. And when you're hungry you'll eat anything. Beware the food you eat.

Some of it's rather obvious and patently self-destructive. Sorrows and stresses made to disappear as the empties stack up. Self-medicating your self-loathing. Finding in work and work alone a validation of who you are. All of them a transference of the desire to be right with God onto something else that makes you *feel* right. Or that at least make you forget you *don't* feel right. They fill the tummy. But they're nothing but dirt and grass.

But even more insidious are the truly religious “highs”—the “highs” invested with religious meaning. You know what those are like. The outwardly impeccable life that validates your godliness. The ability to rattle off the sins others struggle with that you never have and never will. A life proudly lived against the tide of the times that proves that you and your family and your friends are righteous and therefore right with God. Good people and therefore favored by God. The preacher who tells you to seek forgiveness from inside yourself instead of from the cross of Jesus. The church that tells you to try harder and do more.

That's a temptation during Lent, isn't? During the penitential season of Lent we're especially attuned to our own sins and temptation. And we put a premium on putting to death what wars against God. And that's all well and good. We should do it. The Lord commands it. We should turn from our sin.

But the irony is that the very turn from sin can become sin in itself. That's no reason *not* to turn from sin. But it's a danger that lurks there. The danger of thinking that hunger and thirst for righteousness can be met and overcome by these exercises under the Law. Just like the Passover pilgrims would have filled their bellies with nothing but dirt. If only they could make the hunger go away!

And it's just that kind of hunger that the Lord Jesus has compassion over. He knows that perishing food will make you perish. He knows that that kind of dirt and grass can only leave you hungry again and ultimately kill you.

And so He gives real food. In fact, He gives Himself as real food. The Bread of Life who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Invent remedies and pretend that dirt is food all that you want. But you'll never be satisfied until you have Jesus. You'll never be satisfied until you have the enfleshed Son of God who died for your sins.

You'll starve, again and again, until that Son of God in the flesh sends His pastors out to you with baskets full of bread—one for each tribe of Israel, the Church. Filled with the forgiveness of sins for you to eat in faith.

That's what happens in this congregation. In any orthodox Christian congregation. The Lord turns 9th and Fillmore into a grassy knoll. And He bids you to sit down. To receive His gifts. His Baptism. His Supper. His Word. And in receiving them, to receive Him who sent them, the Bread of God who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

When you're starving, you'll eat anything. When your faith is empty you'll fill it with anything.

Take care to eat only the best: the Bread of God who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Amen.

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