

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is week three of our Bread of Life summer school from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. From the feeding of the five thousand in the first week we were reminded that God is our provider and we learned that Jesus is not only an agent of God's provision, but that he is also the content of that provision that we didn't know we needed. That second point turns out to be very difficult to get across, and so it will remain a central theme throughout the course. Last week we learned what we could say is John's version of "one does not live by bread alone," which is to say that as important as the basics of life are, the life God created us for is about more than mere survival. That brings us to this week, and I'm just going to say right up front what I think we're meant to learn today so that we can keep it in mind as we go along: the life that God intends for us is not something we are meant to achieve by our own heroic efforts, like the Olympic glory that you may or may not be paying attention to at the moment. The life God intends for us is something that we are drawn into by the grace and effort of God alone. "No one can come to me," says Jesus, "unless drawn by the Father who sent me." That may sound like bad news to the overachievers in our midst, but I'm going to suggest that turns out to be very good news indeed when we realize that we are not after all the overachievers we like to think we are.

The three readings before us this morning reflect three important movements in our relationship with God that I want to explore with you in the next minutes. The first is a complicating incident that reveals that we have a problem, the second holds up a mirror to our actions to help us see our problem more clearly, and the third movement is God's action that moves us toward a resolution of the problem. I want to look at each of those in turn.

The first movement, which we began to explore last week, is our innate desire to be in control of our lives and pursue our own agendas without regard to anyone else or the world around us. When things go well for us, as they tend to do for the demographic mostly represented in this room, we may not even notice that this is a problem. If we think of God at all, we imagine God endorsing and blessing our way of life. God is our co-pilot. We are the pilot in command. It's only when the illusion of our control begins to break down that we notice our problem. And as we noted two weeks ago, that was true of the crowds following Jesus in John chapter six. They came looking for him because they heard reports of his healing, something they couldn't do for themselves. But last week and this week we notice that the problem goes a little deeper. There is about us a perpetual discontent, an existential dissatisfaction with this life, even when basic needs are met. We talked last week about the complaining of the Israelites in the Exodus story when they had no food and water, and how that was a legitimate complaint. But we remembered also that they continued to complain even after they were fed and watered. The manna God provided wasn't as tasty as the meat they had back in Egypt. The grumbling of the crowd in our Gospel text is meant to remind us of that story. Jesus is the bread of life from heaven that they are not content with, and so they complain. "Who does he think he is? Does he think he's better than us?" And isn't this also a continual feature of our celebrity-obsessed culture? We love to make idols of people and to bask vicariously in their achievements and fame. But we also, perversely, love it when we can bring them back down to our level. We both admire and resent the good fortune of others, and we revel in gossip and scandal.

This leads already into the second movement in God's relationship with us, namely God holding up a mirror to us to help us see our situation and our problem more clearly, to show us who we are and who God is. This idea of a mirror comes from Martin Luther's insight into how God's law works. Usually, we think of laws like the Ten Commandments as instructions for living, God saying "do these things" and us doing our best to comply. Luther realized that because of our captivity to sin we actually *can't* do what the law requires. So, the law functions for us less like a list of instructions and more like a mirror, showing just how deep our problem is. Jesus is doing that with his disciples and the crowd in John. But it's our reading from Ephesians this morning that does this particularly well for us and our current situation. I hope you felt at least a little convicted by all of the advice given here. "Put away falsehood and speak the truth." "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up." "Put away bitterness and wrath, wrangling and slander." How are we doing with all that? How do we look in *that* mirror? As I already hinted earlier, I think that collectively, as a society in our current social and political climate, we look terrible. Falsehood, slander, and tearing down are what we feed ourselves with. It's what characterizes much of our political campaigning. It's what sells on TV, radio, social media, and podcasts. It feels good, just like junk food, and just like junk food it is killing us.

And that is why the third movement of God's relationship with us is so crucial. Because it is God who must resolve the problem that we have gotten ourselves into. We cannot free ourselves from the captivity to sin that we are in. We cannot cheer ourselves out of the despair that our predicament provokes. God must come to us and draw us to Godself. And that is just what God does. In both our first and our Gospel readings, this movement takes the form of feeding. In that first reading, Elijah's faithfulness to God has brought him nothing but grief. He has defeated the prophets of Baal, but the queen is now out for his blood and he is tired of fighting. But God will not let Elijah give up. God's messenger, the angel, provides him with bread and water, together with encouragement that is also a promise that God is with him. In John, Jesus compares himself with the life-saving manna that God showered on the people of Israel. But there is also now the hint in that very last verse of our reading that he is also the Passover lamb that gives its life to save God's people from death and provide food for the journey ahead.

As I said last week, John's community would have heard all of this as an allusion to the communion meal they celebrated, the means by which Jesus comes to abide in them and they in him. And that of course is the connection for us as well. In this assembly gathered around word and sacrament, God is truly and deeply with us and for us in Jesus Christ, who feeds us in this meal with his very life, giving us encouragement in our despair and food for our journey ahead. And let me say also to those of you joining us online right now or watching the recording later: the promise of Christ with us in the Holy Communion is a promise that is also for you, even if you do not physically commune with us right now. And for those of you who will partake of this meal: treasure this gift, and receive it as the embodied promise of life that it is for you... but not only for you. Because in this meal we become what we receive. You will be sent out today with the words, "you are the body of Christ." That's a body that is meant to be given away. So we leave here to embody God's life-giving promises in a world too often beset by hopelessness, despair, and empty promises. Christ is with you and in you, and through you is at work to give life to the world. Take that promises to heart. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.