

Bread of Life

John 6:35-51

The saying goes, “You are what you eat.” What we eat affects us in many ways. If we eat too much sugar, we may develop diabetes. If we eat too much fat, it may affect our hearts. If we eat too much junk food, we may become unhealthy in any number of ways. And if we eat right, we may be able to stay healthy. An apple a day keeps the doctor away, after all.

Eating is important for health for normal people. For elite athletes, it can be even more important. Years ago, my wife and I went on vacation to Colorado Springs. While there, we toured the US Olympic Training Complex. We saw the training facilities that many of the Olympic hopefuls use to train for the Olympics. But it’s not just the athletes who are there. There’s a large support staff. Our tour guide, who was there training for the skeleton in Colorado Springs because he didn’t want to be stuck in small Lake Placid for the summer, talked about all the people who help him train. There are strength coaches who help them focus their exercises on the actions and parts of their bodies that are most important for their sport. There are athletic trainers and physical therapists that help them cool down and stretch after their workouts. There are dieticians who make sure that they get enough of the right kinds of foods to fuel them through their training. By the time that they get to the point of being selected to go to one of the Olympic training complexes, they need even more help than they had before to get over those final training hurdles, to prepare to compete against the best in the world.

We see that even here at Iowa State University. The new Sports Performance Center attached to the Bergstrom Football Complex at the north end of Jack Trice Stadium, has a football nutrition center and a student athlete dining hall

as parts of it. Athletes and those who work with them know that what they eat matters.

Today’s Gospel lesson continues where last week’s left off. Jesus had fed a crowd of over 5000 with only five loaves and two fish, and the crowd had followed him across the Sea of Galilee, looking for another meal. In the section we hear today, though, Jesus tells them they are what they eat, and they should eat him.

Jesus tells his hearers that he is the Bread of Life. Just as God had provided bread in the wilderness for the Israelites on the Exodus, so God was providing what His people needed through Jesus. He gave them all the same food to bring them together.

The crowd, however, has trouble understanding what Jesus means. They came expecting a free lunch, and now Jesus is talking about eating his flesh. They don’t understand what Jesus means. They don’t understand what Jesus is telling them.

Eating the bread means believing in Jesus, and believing in Jesus means having eternal life. But just as Nicodemus didn’t understand when Jesus told him he had to be born again, just as the woman at the well didn’t understand when Jesus said he would give her living water, the crowd did not understand. They didn’t understand that in Jesus all spiritual hunger and thirst is satisfied.

When God gave the people of Israel manna to eat in the wilderness, they were only given enough for each day. They had to keep depending on God’s provision, because the manna would spoil after a day or two. They would still get hungry. They had to keep eating so they had strength for their journey. But the

manna didn't keep them safe. They still complained about the food God gave them. They talked about the food they had while they were slaves in Egypt, and longed to go back to slavery. Jesus, the bread of life, is better nourishment and strength than the manna because he lasts. His ability to nourish us lasts forever.

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, though, we hunger for the wrong things. Instead of seeing how God has blessed us, we look with envy at those around us. We see perfect lives shared on social media, and see how our lives could never compare, forgetting those carefully curated collections are not real. We want more and more, instead of being satisfied with what we have. We crave quick snacks instead of that which truly satisfies. Much of the time, our hunger is turned inward, about what we think will make us happy.

But Jesus came to give us a life full of contentment and satisfaction, no matter our circumstances. When he gave his life for the life of the world on the cross, he did so in order that we might be full. Full of true, everlasting life. Full of true contentment.

Eating the bread of life doesn't fix all of our problems, but it's a start. In our Old Testament Lesson, the bread the angel gives Elijah doesn't fix all of his problems. He's still on the run from a king and queen who want to kill him. He's still in the wilderness. But after a nap and some food, he can at least look around and start to see things differently. He can start to see things the way God does. He can see how God is in control, and how God is with him, no matter what else happens.

Food is a big part of what happens here. I remember a Lutheran campus ministry had a sign in their kitchen that read, "If an army moves on its stomach, the Lutheran Church will

go far." Most of the social events we have at church also involve food in some way. The soup suppers during Advent and Lent, the biannual potlucks, the monthly FISH dinners, senior breakfasts, even coffee and donuts after early service on Sundays are times where eating together gives us a chance to talk with one another, to listen to each other. Vacation Bible School had snacks in the morning session, and a full meal for families for the evening session. Food brings us together.

When Jesus fed the 5000 and called himself the Bread of Life, he filled the hungry with good things, and he continues to do so. Just as God had provided bread in the wilderness for the Israelites on the Exodus, so God provided what His people needed through Jesus, and he continues to do so today. It may not always be what we want, but it is what we need.

Just like athletes, you have to eat the right things. Now I'm not telling you to follow the Jesus diet or do a Daniel fast, to go Paleo or follow a Mediterranean diet. No, you have to eat Jesus. You are what you eat, after all.

And so we eat of the bread of life, of what God provides for us. We eat of the bread of life in Holy Communion, when we receive the body and blood of Jesus given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. But not just then. We are given what we need to be sustained through our earthly journey through the gifts we receive here. God's Word read and proclaimed. Sins confessed and forgiven. All given by God to strengthen our faith and our bonds with God and each other.

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August 8, 2021