



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

## **“I Am the Bread of Life”**

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Jesus said to them, ‘I am  
the bread of life; whoever  
comes to me shall not  
hunger’” (John 6:35).*

**August 12, 2012**  
**11th Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Collect of the Day**

Gracious Father, Your blessed Son came down from heaven to be the true bread that gives life to the world. Grant that Christ, the bread of life, may live in us and we in Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Bread is about more than just food. It has a significance beyond nutrition. For example, in our language bread is another word for money. Dough also works. We speak of the breadwinner in the family, and if you have a job that you don't love, you might say, "At least it puts bread on the table." Bread is about more than just nutrition. If we're really impressed with something, we say "it's the greatest thing since sliced bread." The Midwest is called the "breadbasket" of the country. And there's something about the smell of baking bread that is so alluring and comforting. It has a way of turning a house into a home. With that in mind, some realtors during an open house will even offer rolls fresh out of the oven. Bread has a significance beyond nutrition.

There is a political dimension to bread. The Arab Spring revolution last year began with protests in Tunisia against the rising cost of bread. Later, in the early moments of Egypt's revolution, crowds in Tahrir Square clamored for "bread and liberty." For many decades, all the way up to 1986, France fixed the cost of bread at artificially low prices, even when it barely mattered in most budgets. It dates back to the time when the political legitimacy of rulers depended upon their ability to protect their people from famine. King Louis XVI of France was known as "the baker" because of the priority he put on making sure everyone had bread on the table. It was not so much because he was a nice guy as it was a desperate attempt to preserve the monarchy. Bread is about more than just nutrition.

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In our text, it's the day after Jesus fed the 5,000 with just two fish and five small loaves of bread. They were hungry and Jesus fed them until they had their fill. The crowd didn't even have to wait in line; the disciples brought the food to them in woven baskets. The crowd liked that arrangement. What's there not to like about it, sitting there on the grassy hillside next to the Sea of Galilee, eating what was probably the best bread they ever tasted. . . what's there not to like?

When my mom pulls out the stops and prepares a really nice meal for the family, someone will inevitably ask, "So, what time would you like us to come tomorrow night?" It gets an easy laugh, but this crowd of thousands, they're not laughing when they suggest a repeat miracle. Malnourishment was an everyday possibility then; meals didn't come as readily or predictably as they do today. So this crowd is seriously thinking it would be nice to have a regular picnic like this. That's the thing about miracles: once you've had one, you always want another. If you've been fed once in a miraculous way, why wouldn't he feed you twice? Clearly it was no skin off his back. If you've been healed once, why would he choose not to heal you a year later? Miracles are like potato chips. You can't have just one.

Chapter 6 verse 15, "Perceiving that they were about to make him king by force, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself." They wanted a bread king, a baker in chief. In Genesis 3, God said to Adam, "By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread." But they liked this arrangement better, where Jesus and his disciples did the sweating and they did the eating.

Of course, this is not why Jesus has come. This was not his calling. He's come to give his life away on the cross. He's thinking they need forgiveness. They're thinking they need bread. He's thinking about their long-term welfare. They're thinking about their short-term hunger. He's thinking his flesh for their offenses. They're thinking his bread for their bellies. So he withdraws. He leaves them and goes on his way.

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The next day they track him down again and he says to them, "You are seeking me because you ate your fill of the loaves." And then he tries to help them understand what they really need. "Do not labor for the food that perishes" he says, "but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you."

"How do we do that?" they ask. "How do we labor for food that endures to eternal life?"

"Believe in me" he says. "Whoever believes in me has eternal life. . . I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died." That is, though miraculous, that manna was no antidote to death. But this bread is different. "I am the bread of life" he says. "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." Then, I'm sure thinking of the cross, and thinking of his Supper, he says, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Well of course this didn't make sense to them at all, and they began to grumble a wave of disappointment in Jesus swept over the crowd and they turned away from him . . . not just one or two, but most all of them. The day began with an enormous crowd. It ended with just the twelve. It's a good reminder to us. Whether a church grows or shrinks is not necessarily indicative of whether it's being faithful or true.

You know, the crowds are still turning away from Jesus. Across America mainline denominations are on the decline. Many of those who do profess themselves to be Christian are fairly lax and indifferent about it all. The faith was meant to be good crusty bread for daily use, but for many it has turned into cake for Christmas and Easter and special occasions. Meanwhile, weird, home grown spirituality is taking off, home grown spirituality which borrows a pinch of this and a dash of that from the major and minor religions and throws it all together helter skelter. It's the epitome of idolatry, the epitome of carving your own image of god and worshipping it. Doing so, people are choosing to eat the husks from the cob while the sweet

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kernels beneath go untasted. We would satisfy our hunger with food for the pigs rather than with a chunk of good brown bread.

“I am the Bread of Life” Jesus said. “Whoever comes to be shall not hunger.” The year I lived in Germany was, looking back on it, a year full of bread. Germans take their bread very seriously; many would say it’s the strength of their cuisine. Each time I walked into a bakery over there I thought I hit the mother load. They don’t understand sweet corn like we do, or burgers off the grill, but their bakeries would win the gold every time, offering a mouthwatering myriad of rich, crusty breads. Curiously, there was another American in my dorm who didn’t like German bread. He went home over Christmas break and what did he bring back with him? Wonder Bread! Four or five loaves of Wonder Bread . . . a number of which got smashed in the overhead compartment. I couldn’t believe it! A fantastic bakery was just around the corner and he brings back Balloon Bread. I thought it was some kind of humorous stunt, but no, he really preferred it, even though it sticks to the roof of your mouth and leaves you more hungry than before. So it is with many of us. We prefer light, fluffy, easy religion without a lot of substance or nourishment . . . we prefer that over the Bread of Life. Give me something I can gum; not something I have to chew. Paul once complained how he could only feed the people of Corinth spiritual milk. They were not ready for solid food. Similarly in the religious landscape of America, we wish to be entertained, not challenged. But what we need more than anything else is the nourishment of the bread of life.

To eat of the Bread of Life is to acknowledge our utter dependence on him . . . for everything, from food to forgiveness. To eat of the bread of life is to sink your teeth into his Word. Read, mark, learn and *inwardly digest it*. To eat of the Bread of Life is to feast on him in his Supper, coming to the table hungry (repentant) and leaving satisfied (forgiven). “Taste and see that the Lord is good” the psalmist says.

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In terms of our bodies, man does not live by bread alone. In terms of the faith, neither does man live very long without it. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." You want spiritual nutrition? You want spiritual satisfaction? You want that antidote to death? Come to him. Don't go to the corn husks or the balloon bread or fluffy ceremonial cake with whipped frosting, full of calories but empty of nourishment. Come to him for your daily hunger. Some hungers will not be satisfied any other way. Frederick Buechner writes, "A glutton is one who raids the icebox for a cure for spiritual malnutrition" (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 35).

Come to him. Don't go anywhere else. "I am the Bread of Life." Notice, he did not say, "I am a Bread of Life". Nor did he say, "I am a Way to the Father" or "I am a light in the world." No, he demands exclusive loyalty. "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me." "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger."

One last story from Germany. There was a time not long into my year when I thought it was all a very big mistake to be there. I was struggling with the language so I was also struggling at the university, and struggling to make friends, struggling to adjust to the culture. (By the way, that's a western culture, a western language. Imagine how much more difficult it is for students from eastern cultures to adjust and make friends here!) In any event, everything was hard; nothing easy.

I took a train down to Stuttgart to see Gus and Gertrude Kiess, an elderly couple that lived half the year in the U.S. and half the year in Stuttgart, dear friends of the family and members of my home congregation. We talked some in their living room about homework and homesickness and what Mark Twain called that "awful German language." And then Gertrude had me sit at their table and started bringing out various types of bread. "You probably need something to eat" she said. Did I tell you I had a voracious appetite back then? "You have to eat to keep

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going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this.” She put real butter on the table and jam and honey and cheese. Gus poured something cold and frothy. “It’s good to eat” Gertrude said. I loved it and I ate heartily and it pleased Gus and Gertrude to see me enjoy the bread. “Smell this” Gertrude said, cutting a piece off a dark loaf. It was heavy, dark, had coarse grains in it and smelled a little of molasses. I listened to them talk about their lives, their church, their friends. I swallowed the dark bread. We visited long into the evening. And you know what? Things no longer looked so grim or dark or impossible. In fact, I was beginning to think it would be ok, that it would all work out.”

Whatever your struggles, whatever your fears, whatever your prognosis, it will be ok. It will all work out. “I am the Bread of Life” Jesus said. “If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.” Amen.

**GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH**

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