

"Bethlehem" (House of Bread)

Texts: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

Ephesians 4:1-16 (Series B. 9th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 51:1-12

John 6:24-35

Let us Pray:

I would like to begin today by telling you an old Japanese story - a fable actually - about Tasuku, a stonemason. Tasuku was a poor man who cut blocks of stone from the foot of a mountain. One day, he saw a well-dressed prince parade by. Tasuku envied the prince and wished that he could have that kind of wealth. The Great Spirit heard Tasuku, and Tasuku was made a prince.

Tasuku was happy with his silk clothes and his powerful armies until he saw the sun wilt the flowers in his royal garden. He wished for such power as the sun had, and his wish was granted. He became the sun, with power to scorch fields and crops and to humble people with thirst.

Tasuku was happy to be the sun until a cloud covered him and obscured his powerful heat. With that, he had another wish, and the Spirit complied. Thereafter, Tasuku was a cloud with the power to ravage the land with floods and storms.

Tasuku was happy until he saw the mountain remain in spite of his storm. So Tasuku demanded to be the mountain. The Spirit obeyed. Tasuku became the mountain and was more powerful than the *prince*, *the sun*, or *the cloud*.

And he was happy until he felt a chisel chipping at his feet. It was a stonemason working away - cutting blocks to sell to make his daily living.

How many of us know people who seem to be driven - unable to relax - unable to find satisfaction for more than a few moments at a time? There are people, a majority actually, who are constantly seeking something - they work or they play; they build or they drink; they join clubs and societies, and they party; or, they change religions or relationships - hoping to find, in these activities, some form of peace, some form of inner quiet, some form of satisfaction. Yet, despite all they do, they continue to hunger and thirst.

- ❖ *What are they looking for?*
- ❖ *What will make them happy?*
- ❖ *What will set their souls to rest?*

Tasuku never found out. Even though all his wishes were granted by the Great Spirit, he was never satisfied. Similar events occurred to the people of Israel, after they were led by God out of bondage in Egypt. They demanded water at Marah - and what was once bitter was made sweet. They demanded bread and meat in the wilderness, complaining to Moses and Aaron that God had brought them out of the security of their bondage in Egypt only to kill them with hunger - and manna was provided - and meat - enough for each day. Yet within a few days, the people were complaining again to Moses and Aaron, complaining that God was trying to kill them, and their children and their livestock.

- ❖ *What were they looking for?* They prayed, and God answered them.
- ❖ *What would have made them happy?* They complained, and God responded.
- ❖ *What would have set their souls to rest?* Their wishes were granted – yet they still were unsatisfied.

What is it that we desire? What thing will allow you and I to "let go"?

- ❖ That which will allow us to trust?
- ❖ That which help us to face life with all its uncertainties?
- ❖ Or do we seek that which will only lead us to want more?
- ❖ Or to want something different?
- ❖ Do we seek the things of God?
- ❖ Or the things of this world?

When Jesus fed the crowd of 5000 with five loaves and two fish, all ate and all were filled - all had as much as they wanted. And they hailed Jesus as the prophet who was to come into the world. And they sought to make him king.

- ❖ for they realized that he could satisfy their hunger,
- ❖ that he could free them from Roman control,
- ❖ that he could put their nation on easy street.

Yet Jesus was not flattered by their interest in him when they sought him out after he crossed the sea. He knew what would last, what had the ability to truly satisfy, and what - by its very nature - was only temporary and passing, quick to wither and fade.

"Very truly, I tell you", said Jesus, "You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life - which the Son of Man will give you."

There is another kind of bread, another kind of food - and to come to realize this is not to despise the things that we already know, the things we need for our daily existence, but it is to discover a balance and a harmony to life; it is to find oneself, to discover the possibility of a lasting peace and an enduring happiness, to uncover the hidden connectedness of life - that connectedness that satisfies the hunger and quenches the thirst.

The well-known comedian, Richard Pryor, was critically burned in an accident many years ago. After his recovery, he appeared on Johnny Carson's *"Tonight Show."* This is what he said: "I learned that when you're seriously ill, suddenly money isn't that important anymore." Then he said, *"All I could think of was to call on God. I didn't call the Bank of America once!"*

Some things are more satisfying than those things which money or success can bring us. Even good health is a passing thing; we will all die, and that is a fact of life. Instead, *Virtue* is that which should be sought; *honesty, integrity, compassion, a forgiving spirit, a good character, a kind heart* are of greater and more lasting value than outside appearances such as large houses, new cars, and large bank accounts etc.

But the bread of heaven that Jesus speaks of in today's gospel is more than *honesty* and *integrity*; it is even greater than a *compassionate* and *forgiving heart or good character*; it is even better than virtue - and striving to lead a moral and upright life -because these things too may perish.

When Jesus spoke of the bread of heaven - of the food that endures - of the drink that satisfies, he did not speak of what we should or should not do daily. He did not preach about our leading a righteous life. He did not recommend particular behaviours and condemn certain

others. No - when Jesus spoke of the bread of heaven, he spoke of *himself* and of belief in him and of faith in God. "What must we do?" ask the people, after Jesus tells them of the food that endures for eternal life. "What must we do to perform the works of God?"

And he replies - "This is the work of God; that you believe in him whom he has sent."

This is it, my friends, but in some way, it is too much for the crowd around Jesus to accept, and they ask Jesus to give them another sign so that they may believe him, a sign like that which Moses gave their ancestors in the wilderness, and finally - at the end of it all – when Jesus tells them that the bread that their ancestors ate in the wilderness came not from Moses - but from God, they did not ask that Jesus help them to believe, rather that he always give them the bread that gives life to the world.

Like so many people today, including all too many people in the churches of our nation, we missed the point of what Jesus says. We refuse to do the work that Jesus says is required if we are to eat and be satisfied - if we are to drink and find that our thirst is quenched, we refuse to simply believe in him! We seem unable to simply trust in God. (*COVID-19 pandemic is a classic example*).

Instead, like our ancestors of old, we grumble and complain, and suggest to one another that Jesus is a hoax, cannot be trusted; a person set on leading us astray, taking away our fun, and causing us to perish. But, my friends - this was and is not the case.

- ❖ *Faith in Christ has satisfied many a person, believe me.*
- ❖ *Trust in God has quenched the thirst of many a thirsty soul.*
- ❖ *Belief in the Lord Jesus has filled many a hungry heart.*

There is a greater world, a greater reality, than the physical world we live in. And this reality, this world, is within, and all around the physical world, it enters our time and our space, and it endures beyond it. The sun and the moon and the stars that we see at night, are greater than us, yet even they will perish. But God, who made them all, will not perish; even his chosen one, his messenger, his son, did not perish when he died for us on the cross, but rather passed through death into eternal life. We are connected to this greater world, to this greater reality. We are linked to it and to the God who made it because God wants it to be so for us.

The power and the beauty and the peace and the joy of God's realm are accessible to us when we believe in Him and the One whom he has sent; when we trust in Him and the One who calls us to eat and drink of the bread and the wine he provides.

There is a Christmas hymn (# 41, Lutheran Book of Worship) that we sing during the festive season, and it goes like this:

O Little town of Bethlehem. How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth, The everlasting light.
The Hopes and Fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight.

In Hebrew the word Bethlehem means a "*House of Bread*." Is it coincident that Jesus was born in a House of Bread - Bethlehem? Or is it the plan of God? I believe this was God's idea - that is why Jesus called himself the Bread of life that has come to world.

Will you say now in your heart this morning, "Yes, Lord - Yes - I know that there is more - and I thank you for offering it to me? I thank you for offering it freely, without regard to my

virtue or reference to my sin. I thank you for showing me where my *home is*, where my *hope is*, where my *future is*."

St. Augustine once said: "*The thought of You stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in You*" (Confessions).

When we know God, the search must be over. Yes, each day to God! Yes, each day to the one who said: "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

And then share the Good News with others - the news that, in the midst of the hunger and thirst of our world, there is a drink that satisfies and a bread that endures. God rains it down upon his people like dew upon the morning grass.

What to take with us and what to leave behind on our Journey to Eternal Life, is clearly set out for us by Jesus. *We are not to work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life...* By Christ we are fed and led.

Through him, we are redeemed; we are forgiven. All we need to do is to believe it as well as we are able, and then live it by our words and actions, by following him. Christ, our Savior, will never abandon us. Jesus is our manna from Heaven, our *Bread of Life*. His are truly nourishing words, and always, always grace-filled.

God is great and'Great is God's faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see; All I have needed your hands have provided: Great is your faithfulness to me.'

Amen.

Prayer concerns: *Matilda Molyneaux-Piper, Wess Bourgaize, Shirley Walker, Hanne Bourgeoise, Ellen Eriksen; the floods in Europe, China, and India; the wildfires in parts of Canada and the USA; COVID-19 patients, essential and front-line workers.*

O God, Creator of All, open us to be willing and worthy to lead the lives to which we are called. Kindle our desire to turn to You again each day, to nourish our souls for the work of heaven that gives life to the world and endures for eternity. We ask through Jesus, our Divine Sustenance; and the Unity of the Holy Spirit; who together with You are One God, for all infinite, imperishable time. **Amen.**

Make melodies in your heart with these hymns:

- **Soul, Adorn Yourself with Gladness # 488**
- **Just As I Am, without One Plea # 592**
- **The Church's One Foundation # 654**

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