

“Abundant Manna for All”

Exodus 16 2-4; 9-15 & John 6: 24-35
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

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I shared a story in our weekly email devotional of the church I worked at when I was a seminary student, and how they had switched from communion wafers to real bread. The first Sunday, as he ripped off a hunk of soft, fresh bread from a real live loaf, Pastor Richard looked me in the eye and said, “not only is this the body of Christ, given for you, Peter. This is really good bread.”

Really good bread. Good bread in great abundance. Shared bread the feeds a crowd. Living bread from heaven. Bread for the life of the world. These are all themes that are woven together into the biblical texts we have before us for this five-week arc here in this long, green season of the church. It’s a story arc that began with last’s weeks gospel reading of the feeding of the 5,000, wonderfully unpacked and brought to life by our guest preacher, Pastor Joel Vander Wal last week. You know, when I spoke to Pastor Joel after the service and thanked him for his sermon, he said, I know I’m a Reformed Pastor but I just hope my sermon wasn’t TOO reformed for and a Lutheran Church, to which I replied that mentioning a great Lutheran theologian like Dietrich Bonhoeffer more than made up for any of that. And in fact, as we continue this Bread of Life story line again this week, I’ll return the favor by quoting a great theologian from the Reformed tradition, Walter Brueggemann. Speaking of the feeding of the 5,000 Brueggemann says when the boy offered his loaves and fishes to Jesus, Jesus “took, blessed, broke and gave the bread. These are the four decisive verbs of our sacramental existence [that is, of Holy Communion]. [Jesus] demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all.

This image of abundance of bread enough—and more than enough—for all reminds me of a vivid image from our most recent Synod Assembly of the St. Paul Area Synod.

Congregations were asked to bring bread for the service—bread that reflected the ethnic background of the congregation or maybe that was typical of its communion practice. Each of these different kinds of bread were gathered together and then place on the altar for the communion service.

Like the leftover baskets of bread that were gathered up after all the 5,000 had eaten their fill, the abundance was so noticeable—so tangible. They practically tumbled off of the altar table. Bishop Lull blessed all the loaves as part of the communion service, and then, after all had been served, congregations we invited to take bread home—a different loaf than they had brought—so that both the abundance and the diversity seen throughout our Synod could be experienced by more folks back in the pews, folks who hadn't necessarily been at the assembly. Real bread. Living bread. Diverse and different bread. Abundant bread.

Abundance has always been the way God operates. Creation is a story of abundance, of God's generosity showing forth in an act of self-giving, bringing worlds and creatures into being. God has always provided for the people abundantly—generously giving according to their need. Not just in the miracles and signs that Jesus performed, but in such generous acts of abundance as the story of Manna in the wilderness in today's old testament reading.

Actually, author, cartoonist and pastor Dan Erlander finds in the story of Manna from Heaven a great illustration of the way that God so generously and abundantly provides for the people of God. In his book *Manna and Mercy*, he sums up the entire biblical story in about 90 pages, referring most of it back to the image of God liberating the people from slavery in Egypt, providing for their every need—hence the Manna part of it—and at the same time showing incredible forgiveness, acceptance and new beginning after new beginning for the people—hence the Mercy part of it.

Drawing on that somewhat familiar story that we heard, or at least heard the beginning of today, Erlander paints a picture of a God of abundance, a God who provides for the people, a God who teaches and guides and directs the people, responding both to their needs but also responding to their grumbling as they wandered in the wilderness for what would end up being forty years. Having brought them up out of slavery in Egypt, and preparing them for life in a promised land, God uses those years in the wilderness as a classroom, a place where they would learn how to live as a partner to God, and as an example to other people.

The first teachable moment came as the people grumbled about their food. There is no food out here in the desert, they said, we were better off back as slaves in Egypt. And so God sent

some sort of edible substance—something they had never seen before, and which they called “WHAT IS IT?” or in Hebrew, Manna. The way God gave the manna, the way they gathered it and shared it, this taught the people a lesson

So lesson one was that God give abundant Manna for all. What Happened: God Provided the Manna every day that they needed it in the desert. And the lesson learned was this: that all food is God’s. In fact, everything belongs to God, and so we can trust God for daily bread, for all that we need from day to day. Also, if you read on, the way that they gathered the manna each day showed that work is a dignified activity that helps God provide for the needs of all people. Everyone had enough, no one had too little; hoarding was unnecessary.

And yet, some people did try to hoard, did try to take more than their share, thinking that more manna brought more happiness. But as we read further on in the chapter, the hoarded manna spoiled, leading to the second lesson Hoarding Stinks. When Some people hoarded the manna, it began to rot and stink. The lesson learned was this: God provides abundantly, so trying to accumulate, or hoard God’s bounty brings about rot, decay, and death. Rather than living with a model of scarcity—that there is not enough or that there may not be enough tomorrow, they learned to trust God for their daily bread.

And then, of course, God had another lesson for them to learn with regard to the Manna, the What-is-it-bread that fell from the sky each day... or nearly each day as it turns out. As we read on, we find that actually no Manna fell on the seventh day of the week (Ex 16:26) but instead, enough fell on the sixth day to feed the people on the seventh, too. And, unlike the rest of the week, the manna stored for Sabbath did not rot or stink. Suddenly, there was another lesson, another gift: the gift of the Sabbath, the gift of realizing that we don’t have to work time to receive God’s abundance. Rather, our work is to help God distribute the abundant manna, and then to rest in God’s mercy.

So Jesus is building on all of these lessons as he shares this somewhat confusing conversation with the people after the feeding of the 5,000. They follow after him—why? Because he gave them bread, he says. No, because we want a sign, I can imagine Jesus getting a little frustrated, at least on the inside. A sign? You want a sign? Like feeding 5,000

with five loaves and 2 fish was not enough, you want a bigger sign? Yes, they say, you know like Moses gave in the wilderness. That wasn't Moses who gave the manna, the what-is-it bread from heaven, Jesus says. That was God. Instead of another sign, you should ask God for the living bread from heaven.

Yes, that's what we want, Jesus. What do we have to do to get some of that bread. Jesus? Do? What do you have to do? Nothing—you simply have to believe in and follow the one whom God has sent, the bread of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Yes, that's it, Jesus. Give us that bread, please! To which Jesus replies, of course: "I am the bread of life. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Do we believe it? Do we believe in God's abundance, or are we stuck in a world view of scarcity, that there is never enough, that our needs will always outweigh our resources? Do we believe it? Do we believe that we not only have enough for us, that we have enough to share? Is our stewardship of our resources in this congregation, for example, geared towards accumulating, piling up, hoarding what we have, or sharing it with a world in need? Is our participation in God's abundance, our sharing of what we have received, it that an after-thought, a one-digit percentage, a leftover? Or is it at the heart of what we do with the abundance we have received?

Again, Brueggemann says: "When people forget that Jesus is the bread of the world, they start eating junk food—the food of [Pharaoh and] Herod. The bread of moralism and of power." As we remember who is the bread of life, the true bread from heaven, the bread broken for the life of the world, may we also avoid eating all the junk food the world has to offer. May we feast on God's abundance, share richly with others, and work that no one goes hungry. May we also say, "Lord, give us this bread always." Thanks be to God. Amen.