

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pentecost 12

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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

Best. Meal. Ever.

—John 6:41-51

There was a buzz in the crowd that evening. It had been a spectacular day. People had come from miles to hear the words of the Teacher. 5,000 men and who knows how many women and children covered the hillside that evening. They had heard Jesus teach, and in the evening they were fed—barley loaves and fish, as much as they wanted. Relaxing in the grass overlooking the Sea of Galilee, on a pleasant late-winter evening, with the sun setting behind them over the Galilean hills, their bellies full, they enjoyed the end to a perfect day: Best. Meal. Ever.

But there was one question heavy on everyone's mind: Who is this rabbi from Nazareth? Around Galilee there were lepers who had rejoined society because Jesus had cleansed them. There were people back in their right minds because Jesus had driven out the demons that possessed them. People who had once been lame and paralyzed were dancing in the streets and telling everyone what Jesus had done for them. And by this time there were at least two people—a little girl and a young man—who on this night were enjoying this evening with their families because Jesus had raised them from the dead. Now this miracle, the feeding of the 5,000, was witnessed and experienced by more people than any other miracle to date. Who was this man who could do such things? They knew he was from Nazareth. They were acquainted with his family. They knew him as the carpenter, the son of a carpenter. But where did he get this power?

Jesus' disciples left the buzz of the crowd, got into their boat and started across the lake toward Capernaum on the north-northwest shore of the lake. Jesus wasn't on the boat when it left; he went out to the boat later that night, walking on the water. He got into the boat, and immediately they arrived at Capernaum. So the new day dawned, and all the people who had been so wonderfully fed the night before now found out the one thing that was lacking in that perfect meal they had enjoyed: they were hungry again. That delicious meal of bread and tilapia fish was done, and the people wanted more. That crowd of thousands of people surged up and down the shoreline looking for the rabbi who had fed them so well. Finally they caught up to Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum.

But today Jesus wasn't going to feed people's bellies. It was time for a different kind of meal. Jesus said, "You're looking for me because you got fed, but you're coming to me for the wrong meal. You like having your sicknesses healed and your bellies filled, but those aren't the things that really matter. You eat, but you still get hungry again. Your diseases are cured, but you still die. What you need is celestial food that satisfies and gives life. I am the Bread of Life that came down from heaven." It was time for a frank, candid conversation about what was truly important. The crowds following Jesus had been getting bigger and bigger, Jesus' popularity was on the rise, but now it was time for a gut check. What are you here for? What do you want? What really matters? "You don't need these things; they're just fleeting and temporary blessings. You need the Bread of Life. You need *me*," said Jesus.

At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." Does their reaction strike you as unusual? All the things these people had seen and experienced and now even tasted from Jesus, and yet they could not believe that Jesus had come from heaven. It might seem odd that people would be so blind and stubborn, but it's really very common; in fact, it's that way with every human being, and Jesus explains why: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Scripture describes our natural human condition perfectly when it says, "The sinful mind is hostile toward God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God" (Romans 8:7,8). All the miracles, all the arguments and arm-twisting in the world are not enough to convince a stubborn human heart that keeps saying, "Show me a sign. Prove it, Jesus. Prove to me who you are!" The only thing that will turn a human heart to believe in Jesus is the Holy Spirit sent by the Father to shatter our hard, stubborn hearts, sweep away the blindness from our eyes, and raise us from spiritual death to life. And isn't that a powerful testimony to how God works? He doesn't force anyone to believe in his Son. No, he draws us with his grace, woos us with his love, and calls us with his gospel, and he himself gives us a new life and a new heart that beats with love for Jesus. "It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me."

Now if it weren't bold enough for Jesus to make the claim that he had come from heaven, his words here are bolder still: "I will raise him up at the last day." The carpenter from Nazareth made this claim: "When this world comes to an end, on that day when time stands still and heaven and earth pass away, when the dead small and great must stand before God in the judgment, I will be the one who calls men and women from the graves where they have slept for centuries, from the four winds where their ashes have blown, from the sea that claimed their mortal remains, I will raise them up at the last day." To claim power over death itself is the boldest claim of all,

because that is the power of God. But Jesus had already demonstrated his power over death—remember Jairus' daughter right here in the town of Capernaum? Remember the young man just up the road in Nain? Jesus would demonstrate even more his power over death when he called the decaying, stinking Lazarus from the tomb in Bethany. The people witnessed Jesus' power over death that validated his claim to be able to raise the dead on the last day.

You want to talk about what matters, what's important? "I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life." Jesus offered his listeners in Capernaum much more than the tasty meal for 5,000 on the previous day. He offered them much more than the manna that the Israelites had eaten with Moses 1500 years earlier in the wilderness. "Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." This is food that overcomes death. This is celestial food that confers immortality. Best. Meal. Ever! Believe in Jesus, eat the Bread of Life, and live forever.

When Jesus taught in the synagogue at Capernaum in John chapter 6, he compelled the crowds that were following him to come to grips with what they wanted from him: earthly food or heavenly food? A full belly, or eternal life? When we study the events of John 6, we have to confront the same questions: Who is this Jesus, and what kind of a meal do we want from him? Jesus tells us everything we need to know about him. He is the eternal Son of the Father, God in human form, the Word made flesh who made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the only-begotten Son, who came from the Father full of grace and truth. Jesus' teaching is consistent: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). He gave his flesh for the life of the world when he yielded to the cross, shed his blood, sacrificed his body, and laid down his life as the payment for our sins. And to prove that he has power to raise us up at the last day, Jesus himself was raised from the dead on the third day, confirming his power over death and validating his identity as God's own Son. Romans 1 says, "Through the Spirit of holiness [he] was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 1:4).

So what do you want from Jesus, and what does the carpenter from Nazareth mean to you? Reflect first on this: you being a believer in Jesus today is a wonderful miracle of God's grace. It wasn't by your choice that you came to Jesus. It's because the Father drew you to Jesus and because the Spirit worked faith in your heart, so that you could believe in Jesus. You yourself are a miracle of God, who overcame your natural stubbornness and resistance to him, and gently, lovingly drew you to him. And having Jesus we have God. God gives us himself, Bread from heaven, to satisfy the deepest cravings of our soul, and to live in us.

And because Jesus is the Bread of Life who came down from heaven from the Father, then he really can claim, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). And when Jesus said, "I will raise him up at the last day" and "The Father has entrusted all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22), he really is the one who will judge the living and the dead. He really is the one who will decide whether we spend eternity in outer darkness and eternal fire or basking in the mansions of the Father in eternal bliss. Heaven or hell—it depends on our relationship to Jesus. "I tell you the truth, he who believes has eternal life." "Whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:18).

And because Jesus speaks the truth, then he really does have the ability to forgive our sins. He gave his flesh for the life of the world. He's the only one who has ever done that or even claimed to do that. He sacrificed himself as the substitutionary payment for the entire human race, and because it was God's blood that was spilled, you can know that your sins are really forgiven. They were completely paid for, washed away by Jesus' blood. "He was delivered over to death for our sins, he was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25). Because he lives we also will live. He really will raise us up on the last day. He will not leave your mortal remains lying in dust and ashes, but just as he promised he will raise us up at the last day.

And because Jesus is God, and his Spirit lives in us, he really does listen to our prayers. He really does know our thoughts, our hurts, our wants, our needs. He really does have all power to answer our prayers as only he knows best. He really does work out all things for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28).

Christian friends, feed on Jesus. Eat the Bread of Life. Eat and live. To eat the Bread of Life is simply to trust in Jesus as your Savior from sin and death, the one who gives you eternal life. It is to repent of our sins, to turn away from ourselves, and to look outside ourselves to see the loving compassion of God in the smiling face of Jesus. To feed on Jesus is to have the forgiveness of sins, to be at peace with God, to have your soul delight in the richest of fare, and to look forward to a banquet table spread in heaven for you with Jesus. To eat the Bread of Life is very simply: the Best. Meal. Ever! Amen.