

Pentecost 10 - Matthew 16, 13-20

Bishop Jason Zinko - Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod

*Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you in the name of Christ our Saviour.
Amen.*

Thank you for inviting me into your congregations and into your homes today to reflect on today's gospel reading. I do this from Treaty 1 land, the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, and Dakota Peoples and the homeland of the Metis Nation.

I don't know about you, but I am exhausted.

I am exhausted from the heat; from a long stretch since I had time off; from the ongoing restrictions due to COVID (even though those are finally lifting). I am exhausted from the horrendous news almost weekly about Indigenous children's unmarked graves; ongoing racism; leaders who just don't seem to get it; watching our forests burn; and civil unrest across the globe. I am exhausted from waiting and wondering when I will feel full again.

Can you relate? Do you hunger for these things that often seem just out of reach?

I don't think that we are alone. I think that many people – Christian or not – struggle with the challenge that some are full while some are hungry. And while we are challenged by that, we also operate as though there is nothing that can be done about it. We work, almost by default, with the belief that there is only so much to go around, so we better get what we can before it runs out.

So, we are left with a particular challenge today when we hear Jesus say, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." It's a challenge because we know of faithful people who hunger and thirst. We see faithful people being kicked down because who they are doesn't fit with a standard that our dominant culture defines. On the flip side, we know decidedly *unfaithful* people who seem to have all they could ever want and more.

So, what does it mean? What does it mean for us to say that Jesus is the bread from heaven that gives life to the world?

For starters, we need to expand our view of what is possible with God. We need to understand that God is at work in ways that we often miss. That certainly happened to the crowd in the gospel reading for today. Jesus took two fish and five loaves of bread, fed 5,000 people with leftovers, walked across the lake, and then the crowd asked when he was going to show them a sign?

When was he going to show them a sign?!? What did they think he was doing?

The writer of John referred to anything miraculous that Jesus did as a sign. So rather than extraordinary miracles, Jesus gave signs that were meant to point to something important about God and show us a way that God is present and active for God's people.

Jesus' work of feeding the people wasn't just about filling stomachs or providing dinner on a shoestring budget. Through that sign, Jesus was trying to show the people then, and us today, that he is the one who provides life and nourishment for his followers. Yes, he provides eternal life in the sense that Jesus will raise up people on the last day. But it's more than just that. Jesus gives life now. Jesus shows us and helps us to live abundant lives now. Jesus works to take away real hunger and thirst now.

But we also need to realize that Jesus is not just a dispenser of things we need. Jesus calls us to take an active part in this work through our baptism.

In the promises of identity, faithfulness, community, and the gift of Spirit, Jesus also sends us out into the world to work in all ways for justice and peace. God claims us in those waters so that we can be part of this global and timeless family following Jesus' example and command.

This means that we are called to stand up against racism – including our own. We are called to help lift up the voices of those who are often silenced or ignored. The way of Jesus is to help those who cannot help themselves and to welcome those who are often unwelcome. As we follow Jesus' call and work together as the Body of Christ, we have the opportunity to witness the life that Jesus is bringing into the world.

Of course, these actions do not mean that we are the bread of the world, or that we are the ones who satisfy the needs of everyone. They are simply signs of us living out the gift of faith that we were given in baptism and that Jesus continues to grow in us. And they are only part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Focusing only on what we do is the wrong approach. We do have a role to play in God's work in the world, and there are many things for us to do, but that isn't the primary thing that Jesus tells us to work toward. In John's gospel lesson, Jesus says that the work of God we are instructed to do is to believe in the one that God sent. In other words – our primary job is to be attentive to our faith lives.

Faith itself is a gift, but we have a responsibility to nurture that faith, to grow in our spiritual practice and to let our faith impact everything about us. A strong faith helps to open our eyes to see all that God is doing around

us. A well-practiced faith allows us to follow Christ who brought us to faith in the first place. Faith helps us to realize the many ways in which Jesus feeds us, restores us, and gives us new life.

That is why building up faith is such a central focus for the ELCIC. Bishop Susan has asked us to focus on living our faith through Praying, Reading, Worshipping, and Loving. The more that these practices become a part of our daily lives, the more that we connect with how Jesus walks beside us, and the more we are able to rely on God's promises for us.

So, if you haven't yet looked into those opportunities to grow in your discipleship, I strongly encourage you to. They can be the start of growing a deeper relationship with Christ, and help us to rely on Christ to be the bread of life for us.

I know that I started off by saying I'm exhausted. And I am. But it is only through Jesus' abundant gifts that we can be fed enough to carry on. It is Jesus' nourishment that sees us through the times when we feel empty. It is Christ alone who will continue to sustain us in all that lies ahead.

I pray that you experience the nourishment and life that you receive from Jesus today and each day. And I pray that the peace of God, which passing all of our human understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus into eternal life. Amen.