

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

'Whoever comes to me I will never cast out.'

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'And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life."'

A strange saying.

Very strange. So we need not wonder why *the Jews might grumble about him, saying 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, "I have come down from heaven?"'*

And yet Jesus answers them. *'Do not grumble among yourselves. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.'*

We need not wonder, for it is strange.

For we are accustomed to hearing Our Lord and Redeemer called many things, equated to many things.

He is *the Way*, for by Him are we given a path to the Father.

He is *Immanuel*, that is, *God with us*, for *being in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. But rather he emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*

He is *the Gate*, for *no one shall come to the Father except by him.*

He is *Wonderful*, for *in Him dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily.*

He is *Wisdom*, for *'before he made the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth, I was there,'* even as *'in the beginning was the Word.'*

He is *the Truth*, for He has come *'to set us free.'*

He is *the Lord*, for *'beside Him, there is no other.'*

So many exalted titles; so many sublime words. But now, the Christ claims a new title, for He would have us call him *bread*.

A strange saying.

So the people grumble. They grumble, for though Jesus has just fed five thousand of his people, their families and all with bread, and though this nation Israel exists only because the dread Lord of Heaven reigned upon his people celestial bread in the wilderness over a thousand years before, yet they have forgotten the meaning of bread.

Bread, remember, is the food of sin, and the flavor of disobedience.

For Adam made no fire in Eden, nor did he bake to eat. Rather he was fed by *every tree of the garden*, watered by *a mist that arose from the earth* and by *the four rivers*.

Yet cursed was he when he desecrated that not given to him; punished and blighted was this world when he trespassed against the one thing that was to be to him holy, the tree that we now call the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

And the curse put upon Adam, and upon us all was this: *'Because you have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you 'You shall not eat', cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns it shall bring forth for you; By the sweat of your brow, you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return.'*

With sweat in our brow, and thorns beneath our feet, within our palms, and against our skin must we labor, that by fire we might bake for ourselves bread, to live out the shortness of our mortal life, until we return to the dust, the very dust which the serpent, Satan himself has been given to consume, even as it is written, *'On your belly shall you go, and dust thou shalt eat all the days of your life.'* And nothing is more true than that even as we derive our life from the dust, so shall we return to it, to be overcome by death, consumed by mortality, made food for the devil, for even now *'he roams as a ravenous lion, seeking whom he may*

devour. Whom he may devour, even in the grave, *'for our last enemy is death.'*

But the Israelites who have followed Jesus grumble against him, for, as St. Mark writes, *'They did not understand concerning the loaves.'*

Who then shall explain to this hard hearted people *concerning the loaves*? Shall it be a prophet? The age of prophets has passed. Shall it St. John the Baptist? His head lies now upon a platter, and his tongue has gone speechless. Shall it be one among the disciples? They lack understanding, even as does the crowd.

No one shall explain to this hard hearted people *concerning the loaves* except our Lord Himself.

But such mysteries are not revealed in words, but in act.

Have you ever wondered why it is that there is a Service of the Word, and a Service of the Sacrament in our Liturgy? It is not because it is a keen form of organization. It is not because of some historical evolution or oddity. It is because the Liturgy knows what we do not; that a point comes where God no longer speaks; rather, He works; where He no longer pours forth His divine word, but manifests His divine presence.

So the mystery of the loaves is revealed not in words, but in act.

For a time came when Jesus had *completed all his sayings* and *set his face like a flint toward Jerusalem*. And why? That we might *understand concerning the loaves*.

It is a long way from Good Friday, but may our minds never be long way from the Passion of Our Lord. For do you not remember how on the night of His suffering, before He was betrayed by Jew and Gentile and Pharisee and soldier, disciple and follower? Do you not remember the *bloody sweat*?

There in the garden he prayed that God's will be done, even as our father Adam bore the burden of the will of the Lord; and *by the sweat of his brow* our Lord watered the garden, that the curse might fulfilled.

And in His bloody sweat was our Lord drug before heathen tribunals, that a mockery of justice might be made of Him, that He might be struck; that He might be spat upon; that all mankind might turn against Him, so that *none of us should*

be without excuse.

And in His mockery he was dressed in the *scarlet cape* of His *pain*, and they twisted together for him a *crown of thorns*, that all might know that, indeed, *the earth shall bring up thorns for you.*

And He was presented before the people, and Pontius Pilate declared, now infamously, those words '*Behold, the Man!*'

In Hebrew, the word for 'Man' and the word 'Adam' are the same. Indeed, Adam's name simply means 'man.'

So hear again what Pontius Pilate declares to the people: '*Behold, Adam.*'

Indeed, this Jesus is Adam; the man who would labor by the sweat of His blood-whipped brow, the man who would be pierced by thorns. Now what is left for this new Adam but to complete His labor, and return to the ground, there to be consumed by death and the devil?

So it is that He bore His cross up the mount called the skull, there to be lifted up, that He might be scorched by the heat of the desert sun and be made for us bread, yet no longer of our sin, but our redemption?

Dear Christians, I do not need to tell you how our Lord, now dead, was sown into the earth as food for the ancient Serpent. I need not tell you how, having descended into hell, He manifested the glory of His divinity, and endless power of His majesty, and *crushed the skull* of the devil, who having deceived man was by man deceived, and who having struck the head of man was by perfect man stricken; who rose again on the third day, breaking the teeth of ungodly death, that we no more may die, but live forever in His glory. I need not tell you how by His victory He redeemed the dust of this world, so that all who are *sown into it mortal are raised again immortal*, and how He sanctified the ground of our mother earth, that *our bodies, cast in dishonor, shall be raised in glory*. These Great Works of God have their own Feasts, their own days of radiance.

But for us it is enough for now that we *be wise, O ye kings, and be instructed, O ye judges of the earth.*

'I sayeth the Lord, 'am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.'

For this, the One Lord and Victor, Christ the Invincible, has labored for us by the thorn-blooded sweat of His brow, and toiled by the work of His Passion to make for us bread of His body, that, eating of it, we may become inheritors of unsurpassed beauty, of life immortal, of eternal beatitude. For the Conqueror of death and hell instructs us, that we may *live forever*.

Ask not how this is possible. Ask not how you deserve such bread. Only heed your Lord's invitation:

'Whoever comes to me I will never cast out.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: I Kings 19:1-8; Ephesians 4:17-5:2; John 6:35-51.