

Sermon – Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; John 6:24-35
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
11 Pentecost – Year B
5 August 2018

“What Is It?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The words “intestinal distress” never fail to catch my attention. And now, I imagine, I have your attention. Anyway, like many of you, I couldn’t help but hear those words in a news report about another food recall this week, in the wake of many people getting sick from eating said food. I was worried at first, but then I heard that it was a recall of salad. Whew. I was safe! The day 7-Eleven starts recalling beef jerky will be a bad one for me but I should be fine until then. The news reports all said that one sure way to avoid the affected lettuce was to not eat anything that had reached its expiration date, as the recalled salad items were all expired. One wonders who needs to be told not to eat expired lettuce. Wouldn’t people just throw it away? It turns out they probably would! After all, Americans waste \$160 billion worth of food, much of which is probably accounted for by half-used jars of mayonnaise hiding in our refrigerators. Part of the problem, of course, is that we buy more than we need; we put more on our plates than we eat. Going back to last week’s sermon, fixing this is a step toward achieving food equality. But another part of the problem is that food isn’t meant to last. We stock up, imagining that this food will fill us, only to find out that we don’t even want it. This is true of so many of the things for which we hunger – prestige or position, the newest tech or the bigger house – but all of these will leave us wanting, too. The joy we feel in a new acquisition evaporates, for there is an expiration date on the joy that things can bring us. And we, too, come with expiration dates. We will one day expire, breathe our last, and be no more. The more we try to fill

ourselves with things that don't truly feed us, the hungrier we will grow along the way.

2. This morning, we pick up the story after Jesus has fed the 5,000. In this sign, Jesus is met by the swarming masses of hungry people, meeting them in their hunger with the miraculous power of the God who loves them enough to fill them. But guess what happens? Their filled satisfaction has an expiration date; they grow hungry again, as biology demands. They chase down Jesus on the other side of the sea, and Jesus knows what they're looking for: food that perishes. They're hungry, and Jesus looks like a meal ticket. But before they can ask for so much as a leftover fish sandwich, Jesus rebukes them. Stop looking for food with expiration dates. No, Jesus is not indifferent to their physical hunger, nor is God uncaring when it comes to this world's hungry masses. Quite the opposite, and God has given us all we need to feed one another. But in today's passage, Jesus is moving from sign to signified, to the thing itself. Jesus' teaching today shows us that he has come to go beyond physical blessing with the blessing we most dearly need – an end to our hunger for meaning and purpose, an answer to the yearnings for which we have no words, the needs we cannot meet apart from God revealed in Christ.
3. Jesus calls them to faith, but they want a sign. Another meal. Proof. A refrigerator filled with edible blessings. Jesus has not come to give them – or us – what they think they want but what they truly need. Long before Jesus and this crowd gathered by Galilee's shore, their ancestors walked hungry in the wilderness, experiencing a bit of intestinal distress, it seems. God heard their grumbling – they were so hungry that slavery in Egypt was starting to seem like a good option – and gave them manna, bread from heaven. It's a delightful word, manna, for the word is a question, "What is it?" In their hunger, they couldn't even recognize the food in front of their face. And so it was for the crowds with Jesus, and often with us. The crowds look to him for bread, but fail to see that Bread of Life standing right in front of them. It is

Jesus himself who is the bread that endures, abides, for eternal life. Bread freely given, the life of God for us to feast upon. All we need to do, all God asks of us, is to believe in Jesus, sent by God. Belief. Trust. Faith. These things are like manna in our wilderness. The Israelites couldn't stockpile the food from one day to the next. It would rot overnight. Instead, they had to learn to trust that the God who fed them today would also feed them tomorrow. Faith is trusting that every good gift comes from God, and trusting that God will continue to meet our needs. Faith is a gift, and it is not something we can stockpile or hoard. It is simply trusting that moment-by-moment grace that keeps us grounded in God's love. Like the laughter of a child or the kiss of a spouse, a warm word of encouragement from a friend or the random kind act of a stranger – faith isn't something we *have* so much as it the surprising love of God grabbing hold of us when we least expect it, and when we know we most desperately need it. Faith isn't having enough in our cupboards for later; it's clinging to the very power of God that fills us moment by moment.

4. Fed in this way, only in this way, will we be full. Everything else will expire. The food will go bad, the technology will become outdated, our cars will rust out and our bank accounts are not transferable to heaven. We ourselves, deny it as we may, will expire and die. Nothing we stockpile or hoard or yearn for can change this basic fact. This Saturday, we'll gather in this room for the memorial service of Pastor Vic Brandt. And I don't know what will be said of him during or after the service as people share remembrances, but I can pretty well guarantee that no one will talk about the stuff Vic owned, the things he managed to accumulate. They'll talk about his service to the church he loved, and the love he offered to the family and friends he was blessed to have. They'll talk about Vic's faith, and they will lead them to the One in whom Vic placed his faith: Jesus Christ. Because when faced with death, even we are wise enough to know we have deeper needs than can be met by our own power or ability. In death, we need resurrection; we need life. And

thanks be to God, the Spirit rushes in to remind us of, to fill us with, the full weight of God's promises made sure in Jesus Christ.

5. And the best part is, unlike so much of the other stuff we spend out money, time, and energy trying to acquire, this stuff is free. Jesus showed up this morning just to hand it out to you. Y'all come! Come to the table and be fed! All you need to do is believe, to trust that when Jesus meets us, our lives are filled because he emptied himself into us, into this whole world through his death and resurrection. Reach out your empty hand and be filled with the fullness of God. You want a sign? It's better than a fish sandwich with a few thousand of your closest friends. It's a cross on which he died for you, and a tomb he left behind for you. Come, feast on the Bread of Life, offered for the life of the world. That's enough for today. He'll show up to meet your needs tomorrow, too. What is it? It's Jesus, the Bread of Life: freely broken, freely given, for you. You can believe it. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.