

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)

Trinity 7 – July 23, 2023

Mark 8:1-9 – Eating Rich Fare

Pastor Peter Wagner

In the name of Jesus. Amen. When there is nothing to eat, people ought to be worried. They ought to be hungry. If there's a famine, it's every man for himself. Beg, borrow, steal. Do whatever it takes to get the basic food and water you and your family need.

The prophet Amos spoke of a terrible famine. A famine for hearing the word of the Lord. "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord God, "when I will send a famine on the land – not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord."

If only there were a famine like that today! If only people ran desperately to and fro seeking God's word. If only they cared. For surely we do have a famine, but almost no one is concerned. Bread is scarce, faithful preaching is rare! Everyone is starving, but they don't know it. If only people knew how much they need every word that comes from the mouth of God.

If people knew they were starving, they would desperately seek after the words of Jesus. Like the crowds that pressed so close against him at the sea of Galilee, forcing him offshore into a fishing boat pulpit. Or like the crowd of four thousand in today's gospel, that stayed in church nonstop for three days and nights, hanging on to his every word. When he preached to the four thousand out in the wilderness, they were so hungry for good spiritual bread that they didn't even think about earthly food for three days. If only we were like that.

Instead, we come to church for an hour a week, and maybe Bible study. But at home, we seldom open the Bible during the week for personal study with our family. Or if we do, maybe only in tiny bites, a page or two from a devotional book. We need to read and meditate on God's word as if we are starving. Day and night, devouring as much as we can. Truly we are starving, but we've learned to ignore the spiritual emptiness in our stomachs.

If there really is a famine, if faithful preaching is so rare, then what an incredible miracle it would be to find some place where an abundant, free feast is being served! To eat your fill in the midst of a famine. Not just dry bread and water, but rich wine, fruit, and meat.

Dear saints, that is what you have right here, at St Paul's. You have the rich feast. This is where God prepares a table before you in the presence of your enemies. This is where your cup overflows. This church is the place where God himself comes, to serve you with his words. He speaks them when the Bible is read, and in preaching. And he serves you with his own body and blood, rich food and drink to sustain you not just for a few hours like earthly food, but for eternal life. By eating and drinking the body and blood of God, you are receiving into yourself the life of God himself, life that has no end.

In today's Old Testament reading from Genesis 2, we heard of a garden that was almost as beautiful as the paradise we have in this church. When the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground, he gave him a garden springing up with every tree that is pleasant to the eyes and good for food. A garden flowing with rivers and laden with gold. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Rich feasting.

But Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command concerning that one tree. They turned away from eating his good food. So they were cursed to never eat again of the trees of the garden, but only of the ground in pain and toil. "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Adam and Eve spent the rest of their lives eating meagre fare. God barred the way to the tree of life. And it must have been awful, as they remembered the good fruit of the garden. They hungered for it all the more. We too have tasted of the good fruit of paradise. We may have been coming to church for years, receiving the word and sacrament. We've tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Yet our senses get dull. We think we've heard it all. The Lord's Supper seems repetitive. We don't feel as hungry as we ought. We forget what rich fare we hold in our hands.

When we forget the rich feast we possess, we succumb to the opinion that every kind of church offers basically the same spiritual food. Does it really matter where you go?

No one who appreciates rich food ever goes back to meagre fare. And what we have in the Lutheran church is so rich. Of all denominations, we have the best understanding of what we receive in church. We have the best reasons to come. We know Christ Jesus himself is here in our midst, preaching to us directly. We know that we actually eat the body and blood of God. We hold the words of Scripture in highest reverence, because they are truly the word of God. Other churches are willing to compromise on doctrine. Or they say going to church means gathering together for mutual encouragement. The truth we have is so much better! We gather together to hear God speaking to us. Other churches say the Lord's Supper is a blessed meal shared in commemoration of the death of Christ. The truth we have is so much better! We gather here for God to serve us. Other churches say that baptism is what we can do for God, to show our commitment to him. The truth we have is so much better! Baptism is entirely God's work, rescuing us from rebellion and making us his own children.

Since you have such rich food in this church, keep coming to eat and drink deeply! And teach your children to appreciate what they have. Read God's word at home together daily. Discuss it, testing what you hear in church according to it. Cling to your rich food as far more precious than any earthly fare.

Teach your children why you go to church. Not just for a social experience, but for precious, lifegiving food. We come because Jesus has promised to be here! When children understand that, church is not a drag, but a joy. Far more necessary than any meal. Truly the bread of life.

God gives you life here by feeding you with himself. Here he gives you to eat of the tree of life and live forever. The cross is that tree of life. On the cross Jesus opened the way back to paradise, back to the tree of life. He opened it by suffering the wages of sin. As 1 Peter 2:24 declares, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree." On the tree of death – the cross – Jesus undid the curse of death, to bring you lifegiving food.

And when the heavenly man came to bring you life, he said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." And he said, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit."

Abide in him. In him is life. Abide in him by returning constantly to the rich fare you have here. Abide in him by receiving the fruit of the cross, the tree of life, here. The way to the tree of life is here. Jesus promises in Revelation 2, "To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." And to conquer is simply to remain here, abiding in the body of Christ and eating his fruit all your days.

Yes, the cross is the tree of life. Its fruit is the fruit of the death of your God. His body given for you. Eating it brings you life forever in paradise. "Blessed are those who wash their robes," says Jesus to you in Revelation 22, "so that they may have the right to the tree of life." By baptizing you into the death of Christ, God has washed your robes, to give you the right to the tree of life. You have a share in Christ and his fruit.

So when the heavenly man came, he had compassion on the crowds, because they had nothing to eat. They were hungry, exhausted from the effort of living by bread alone, starving for every word that comes from the mouth of God. For three days, they stayed with Jesus in the wilderness, hearing the words of the bread of life. And so it was a very little thing for him to also feed them all with seven loaves and a few small fish, just as he had already fed them with everlasting words.

And when Jesus fed the four thousand, he spoke in the language of the Lord's Supper. His words sound exactly like the Words of Institution. "And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd." By these words, Jesus is clearly pointing ahead to when he would feed not just a few thousand, but when he would offer his body for the life of the world. He's saying that no longer is the fruit of the tree of life forbidden, but freely given. You have the rich fruit of the cross, here in the Lord's Supper.

He who fed the four thousand in the wilderness with miraculous bread, he is the same God who planted the tree of life in the garden. And he is the same God who gave himself on the tree of the cross for your salvation, who gives you this day your daily bread and all you need, who prepares a table before you and makes your cup overflow, who gives you his body as the bread of life each week, and who will give to you on the last day to eat forever of the tree of life. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. Abide in him. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.