

Laetare, A ✕ D 2010

John 6:1-15

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 The hardest thing about the Lenten fast is being hungry. But that's the point. As the fast drags on, the rumblings from your belly become more tolerable. You learn, albeit slowly, that hunger is okay. Hunger is good; it chastens and disciplines. It reminds you that your belly is not your god, nor is any other part of your body. Since the first Sunday in Lent, this hunger has reminded you of Jesus' words to the devil in the wilderness: "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

2 The problem is that you don't naturally believe that. Which is why you try desperately to avoid hunger. Your nature believes that you live by bread, or at least by the means to buy bread. In fact, when it comes down to it, the Word of God is the first thing to get sliced out of the schedule; bread is the last. If you're pressed for time, family devotions are an easy thing to eliminate. If you need to work a few extra hours, the weekend is an easy place to squeeze some in, especially if some of your coworkers are remiss to work on Sunday mornings. If you're short on sleep, skipping Bible class or Sunday school is a quick way to gain an hour. If your budget is feeling a squeeze, the first place you think to trim is in your offerings and your giving to the poor. To combat those natural, yet sinful tendencies, the Church gives you Lent, a time for self-denial, a time for fasting, a time to be hungry.

3 And then, just over halfway through Lent, we come to Laetare, a slight break in Lent, the flowers return for a moment, the colors lighten from violet to rose. And the Gospel reading calls to mind a Jesus who, having known what hunger is, cares about your hunger and your need for daily bread. Seeing that a large crowd was following Him, Jesus had concern for where they would get bread. He cared whether they had anything to eat. And He cares whether you have enough to eat. God gives daily bread to all people, even to all evil people, but we pray in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer that God would cause us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving. He gives food, drink, clothing, shoes, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like. What God gives is enough. Fasting is designed to teach you that, and designed to teach you to give thanks.

4 Hunger is okay to endure and beneficial for the lessons it teaches. Hunger teaches you to pray. The time spent with a rumbling belly teaches you who is the Source of all you have. And then, as you abstain from what is plentiful, hunger teaches you to give thanks. Hunger teaches you that everything you have comes from God, and so the pangs of hunger become the petitions of thanksgiving. Hunger also disciplines you. The more you are able to say "no" or "not yet" to your belly, you learn to withstand temptation. The sign of maturity is the ability to delay gratification. Moreover, hunger gives you insight into the difference between need and want. In so doing, hunger teaches you to tithe and to give alms to those more needy than you. And when your stomach growls for want of bread that only postpones death, hunger teaches you to be hungry for the Bread of Life.

5 “Just as physical life has to have nourishment to be sustained and grow, so also spiritual life. If you have life in God, you must nourish it with the Bread of Life, or it will wither and die. Many Christians live a very poor spiritual life: eyes are dull, hands withered, and knees weak. This happens because they don’t nourish themselves properly with the Bread from heaven. – What kind of bread is that? *Jesus says: “I am the Bread of Life.”* With His love, grace, Spirit, and life, He is in the Holy Gospel through which you partake of Him, when you use it from the heart...Use the Word diligently then, both by yourself and together with others. Daily renew your baptismal covenant, and partake of the Lord’s Supper regularly...Are you hungry today for the Bread of Life? Does your heart beg for life and happiness, for faith and love, for peace and forgiveness of sins? What the Lord’s servants have to offer you seems so little. But really there is life and truth in it. Eat and drink without cost; indulge yourself heartily. You will get all you need and it shall be more than enough for everyone. – But if you do not hunger for Him who is the Bread of Life, then you are most certainly dead spiritually. God help you to wake up before it is too late!” (Laache, 236-237)

6 Lent is a season of homecoming, and Laetare is the original Mothering Sunday. In this season and on this day, the impenitent, the stubborn, the wandering, the straying are called home. In the Church of England, people would return to their families and to their mother parish on this Sunday. And throughout all of Lent, those who have strayed are welcomed back into the fellowship of God’s people. Bread rots, but not the Bread of Life. The Lord provided for the crowd gathered on the shore of Galilee. He took the lunch from a boy clever enough to bring food for himself and, having given thanks, distributed the boy’s five barley cakes and two pickled fish to the crowd of thousands. And everyone ate until he was full. When the disciples gathered the leftovers, they each filled a basket, making twelve full baskets of gracious leftovers from the miraculous feeding.

7 Immediately following today’s Gospel reading, Jesus tells the crowd, “The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...I am the bread of life.” Death is the real problem, caused by sin—your sin, Adam’s sin, the world’s sin—and bread is the solution. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Your heavenly Father provided for your real needs by sending His Son Jesus to be the substitutionary sacrifice for sin. The Living Bread from heaven gives life by laying down His life. His death on the cross destroyed sin, death, and the devil. Will He not also give you daily bread? He will.

8 Here your hunger is satisfied. Maybe your belly rumbles for more food, for nicer clothes, for more security from day to day. But your life rumbles for more of the Bread of Life. And here, there are limitless basketfuls of leftovers. As proof of His concern for your needs of both body and soul, Jesus gives you Himself, the very Bread of Life. If He feeds you at His altar with His Body and Blood, if He forgives your sins, He will not leave you to fend for yourself against the world, the devil, and your sinful flesh. If He gave His life to pay for your sin, He will not be stingy with what you need to sustain you each day. You are His baptized child. He feeds you with His Body and Blood. Entrust the rest of the days to Him as well.

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Pastor Jeff Hemmer