

Proper 13 (August 3, 2014) Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 136 1-9 (23-26); Romans 9:1-5 (6-13); Matthew 14:13-21

“O Living Bread from Heaven” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #642)

“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.” John 6:58

Have you ever tasted really great bread? Not the kind of mass produced fluff that flattens paper thin between your fingers and ends up sticking to the roof of your mouth. No, I’m talking about bread that’s been lovingly crafted by a master baker that possesses memorable flavor, texture and aroma; bread with *gravitas* that calls you to reach for another slice. Once you taste this “staff of life,” you’ll never be satisfied with run of the mill pap that passes for bread found on most grocery shelves. Perhaps it was this kind of bread that the author of “O Living Bread from Heaven” was thinking about as he penned the words to this communion hymn.

In the first three stanzas of this most personal poem, the author, Johann Rist, (a Lutheran pastor during the Thirty Years’ War) describes the wondrous blessings that flow from the “bread of life.” He speaks about the great gifts that have been granted through the “living bread” that gives rest, healing, and the grace that all the wealth of the earth could never buy. This is the God-given food that destroys death, eliminates woes, provides eternal joy and calls the worshipper to bow down in utter humility before the throne of God in thanksgiving for the life-giving meal that Christ provides with his very body and blood in and with the bread and wine. This is no ordinary supper; it is *the meal* that can be prepared and served only by the Master Baker with ingredients we could never purchase that originate from the Master himself and grant unmerited grace to those who trust in the Living Bread.

The final stanza reiterates the theme of the unmerited grace and calls the newly nourished believer to vigorously serve God with “holy fear” until that time when He calls us from this world to live with Him in that place where, through the meritorious work of Christ, perfect joy forever flows.

The gospel lesson for today is the story of the Feeding of the 5,000. A distinctive story because of all the miracles of Jesus, this is the only one (not counting the resurrection) that is recorded by all four gospel writers. Perhaps the four evangelists thought this event was doubly significant because it was a precursor or, if you will, a rehearsal for the meal Jesus would serve to the disciples on Maundy Thursday. In the miracle of the Feeding of the 5,000, we have a foreshadowing of a greater feast which is yet to come.

Christ takes the bread, breaks it, gives it to the crowd and all are satisfied. He does the same at a much smaller gathering on the night in which he was betrayed, but a greater miracle takes place; a miracle in which physical hunger is satisfied and eternal hunger is sated as the disciples receive the body and blood of their Savior. No worthiness on their part, nor on ours, yet in this meal Christ provides us with His own Living Bread that offers forgiveness of sins and strengthens us for service to others. This is the life-giving bread not merely a pleasant metaphor. Christ is the Bread of Life from whom flows forgiveness, reconciliation, resurrection and life everlasting. He invites us to experience the gifts he freely gives us; to taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8) and to live lives of service to God and to others so that they too might discover and revel in the Living Bread that grants eternal life.

Dr. Jeffrey E. Burkart

Emeritus Professor of Education and Artist in Residence



O Living Bread from Heaven

O living Bread from heaven,
How well You feed Your guest!
The gifts that You have given
Have filled my heart with rest.
Oh, wondrous food of blessing,
Oh, cup that heals our woes!
My heart, this gift possessing,
With praises overflows.

My Lord, You here have led me
To this most holy place
And with Yourself have fed me
The treasures of your grace;
For You have freely given
What earth could never buy,
The bread of life from heaven,
That now I shall not die.

You gave me all I wanted;
This food can death destroy.
And you have freely granted
The cup of endless joy.
My Lord, I do not merit
The favor You have shown,
And all my soul and spirit
Bow down before your throne.

Lord, grant me then, thus strengthened
With heavenly food, while here
My course on earth is lengthened,
To serve with holy fear.
And when You call my spirit
To leave this world below,
I enter, through Your merit,
Where joys unmingled flow.

Text: Johann Rist (1607-1667); translation by Katherine Winkworth (1827-1878)

Tune: ACH GOTT VOM HIMMELREICH *Musae Sioniae*, vol. 7, Wolfenbüttel, 1609, ed. Michael Praetorius

Text and tune: Public domain

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded and printed for local use.]