

Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost (B), Proper 13, 6viii2006, 08:30, 10:00  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania  
Holy Eucharist – Missa Brevis / Holy Communion Liturgy, LBW Setting 2  
Exodus 16:2-4,9-15, Psalm 78:23-29, Ephesians 4:1-6, John 6:24-35

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was  
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

Jesus said to them: "I am the bread of life.  
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,  
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

-- John 6:24-35

Most of us here are old enough to remember a beloved American folk singer and actor, Burl Ives. And most of us who remember Burl Ives will also remember one of his recording hits, "The Big Rock Candy Mountain." It is a song of the Great Depression in America, a hobo's dream of a world in which every need and want was provided for, a magical mountain on which everything good to eat grew on the trees and everything a thirsty hobo

could wish to drink flowed in the cool streams of the big mountain, itself made of rock candy. There, in the hobo's dreamland, there would be no railroad conductors or police to harass those who rode the rails, for who would want to leave such a place. But the song describes the goodies of this imaginary place in such detail that I have always lost my appetite for any of the things described in it by the final stanza.

In reality, there are no rock candy mountains, either big or little, but it is amazing how quickly people grow tired of the most important blessings, and even of the most important blessing of all.

All four Lectionary readings today reveal the nature of God's grace and how we respond to that gift of God's truth and love. Historically, the People of God have been very glad to receive God's life-giving and life-

saving grace. There is one example of this in today's First Reading from the 16<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Book of Exodus. The liberated Hebrew slaves were running low on the provisions they had brought with them from Goshen in Egypt to into the arid Sinai Peninsula. That is, a whole community numbering in the hundreds of thousands was in danger of starving to death. Panic was beginning to take hold of the people, and they turned that panic on Moses and Aaron. The LORD assured Moses, and Moses in turn assured the people that they would have meat to eat each night and that bread would rain down on them from heaven each morning. They then fed on the thick flocks of quail that alighted all over their camp on that and successive nights. In the morning they discovered a substance they had never seen before and asked in Hebrew, 'מַה־הִוא' [*Ma na?*] or 'What is it?', something with

which they were able to make dough for bread, but only enough for each day.

They must have been ecstatic at first to receive this gift of much-needed food. The Psalmist celebrates this miracle in today's Psalmody. But, if you read on past verse 15, you will find that the people quickly grew tired of the bread from heaven and that they complained to Moses again, forgetting that the bread, which they received from the hand of God and through the ministry of Moses and Aaron, had saved their lives, forgetting and counting as nothing the grace of God. Despite their unbelief, the Almighty had chosen to feed them, but they had forgotten that gift, and they had forgotten the Giver as well.

In today's Gospel, the crowd that had witnessed the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes catch up with Jesus in Capernaum, on the Jewish side of the Sea of

Galilee. Here the narrative in John is a little confusing, because the crowd that follows Jesus follows Him from the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee, yet they refer to the Hebrews of Exodus as "our ancestors [who] ate the *manna* in the wilderness." In any case, Jesus refers to God Who gave the *manna* as "my Father," and He then explains that the true *manna* is that blessing God gives for the life of the whole world. Still thinking of material food and of the blessing of God as though the Kingdom of God were some 'big rock candy mountain,' the crowds do not comprehend what Jesus says about the distinction between 'food that perishes' and 'food that endures for eternal life.' Even less do they understand what Jesus means when He refers to *Himself* as that eternal 'bread of life.'

According to the Gospel of John, there will finally be four things to which the crowd and the religious

leaders object in Jesus teaching and healing ministry. One offense is Jesus' forgiveness of the sins of others and His identification of Himself, in so doing, with the will and person of God. Another offense will be His healing on the Sabbath. A third offense will be His raising of Lazarus and others from the dead. The final offense, because of which many from the wider circle of His Disciples and one from among The Twelve will forsake Him, will be His sayings about being the bread, or the food and drink of Heaven. Beginning in verse 41, Jesus' hearers begin to take offense at this teaching, but Jesus sharpens His words in a crescendo that continues throughout the 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter.

In Christ, God gives us more than that which will satisfy a limited need or craving. In Christ, the Triune God gives us His grace three-fold. In Christ, the

Word of God Incarnate, in the gift of God, placed in our arms as a tiny Infant, but also in Christ Crucified, God's own and only Son, put to death at our hands, His broken body placed in our arms as He is taken down from the Cross, and finally in the Risen Christ of the Eucharist, feeding Himself to us from every Altar in His one, true Church throughout the world, God's three-fold grace is made available for the life of the world.

How can this possibly be? Were we *that* hungry that God had to go to such an extreme to feed us? Some, including Jesus first hearers, took offense in that way. Some take offense in this way still. At the beginning of nearly every Divine Service, God's people recall how very hungry we were and have been as we have wandered in the wilderness of our sins. Some recall this hunger gladly, wishing to be fed and renewed with

God's Word of forgiveness. Others, having grown tired of the preaching of God's Word and having grown weary of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, complain and grumble and absent themselves, according to whim, from that meal Our Lord commanded us to share as often as we might. Perhaps these self-satisfied souls have not really read the menu of what the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son has to offer in the way of nourishment.

A great living hymn-writer of our Lutheran Church, Jaroslav Vajda, has listed a number of key elements in worship that is authentically Christian and authentically Lutheran. Chief among these is the requirement that each and every part of the service should make us *hungry* for the Word of God in Jesus Christ. The confession of our emptiness and hunger in the entrance rite of the liturgy is important, but so is the tantalizing

prospect of being fed by and with the Risen Christ, just as hunger pangs may cause us to pull off the highway on a long trip to stretch our legs and get a bite to eat, but it is the *menu* placed before us that makes us decide to eat at that road-side diner.

Do you feel overstuffed, sated with all the delicious things of the 'big rock candy mountain' of our consumer society, so much so that you hardly have room for the grace of God? Then look back on the times in which, where you have really felt and known your emptiness, Christ has filled that void with His Word of forgiveness and hope. Let us look back together on those ways in which we have torn open our hearts through our rejection of God's love, calling to mind the torn and bleeding hearts that have been healed by the Body and Blood of Christ through which He brings us into union

with Himself. The peace of believing that, regardless of what storms and sadness, regardless of what frustration and bitterness have marked my life, the Lord of this Holy Supper has invited me to His table, that He has pronounced me fit to sit at His side and that He has filled me with His very own life, of which I am now the bearer, is the greatest and deepest peace I know. I pray that you know it, too, and that you will know His peace at this Altar by accepting His invitation to you this very hour.

Please join me in prayer now as we turn to Page 48 in the forepart of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and offer together the prayer "Before Holy Communion" as you will find it at the top of the page: *We do not presume to come to Your table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in Your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under Your table. But You are the same Lord Whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of Your dear Son, Jesus Christ, and so to drink His blood, that we may evermore dwell in Him and He in us.* ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to Our God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

✠ Amen.

S. D. G. !