

## *“What’s for Supper”*

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 18  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, August 2, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is inevitable that, as I am making supper in the kitchen for my family of five, I will be asked by each person at a different time, and possibly more than once, “What’s for supper?” Now, I don’t mind answering the question, though I find it amusing that they often ask me multiple times, or that just as soon as one person has left the kitchen, now knowing that answer, another enters and asks the same thing. I find it amusing that, even if there is a large jar of Prego Spaghetti Sauce and a box of spaghetti prominently displayed on the counter, they will ask me, “What’s for supper?” I don’t suppose I need to tell you that we’d be having, naturally, spaghetti. I can be up to my elbows in a ground beef mixture with a recipe entitled in big letters “Mom’s Meatloaf,” or threading cubes of marinated chicken and chunks of onion and pepper onto shish kebob skewers, managing to skewer myself in the process, and more than one person in my family will waltz through the kitchen and say, “What’s for supper?” Do that too often, Buddy, and you better watch out when I have an extra skewer in my hand.

Then again, I would rather repeat myself umpteen times and let folks know well ahead of the supper hour what exactly it is we’re having, than to have them come to the table, stare at the heaping bowl or platter of whatever I prepared, and ask, “**What is that?**”

Years ago I tried to make some ham and broccoli and crescent roll kind of thing. **Once.** After I made “Zesty Ziti,” the recipe was promptly Xed-out of the recipe book. I’ve attempted a number of oven-baked-but-tastes-just-like-fried chicken recipes and they’ve pretty much all gone by the wayside. Perhaps blessedly so.

I’m not a bad cook. I’m a pretty decent cook, in fact. It’s just some recipes don’t pan out in flavor or appearance. They never look like the picture in the magazine. No wonder the family asks, “What is that?” I try not to take the question personally, because, after all, my chicken corn chowder was a big success. So were my Swedish meatballs and my turkey tetrazzini, and probably at first glance the family wondered what **those** things were when I served them. Still, my ego is sensitive to how family members react when they see what I’ve whipped up.

Now, I **doubt** the ego of the Lord God was bruised by that same question posed by the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. (Though it was clear to God his people never seemed either to understand or appreciate God’s continual goodness to them.) They woke up in the morning to another dreary day of wilderness living, saw a fine flaky substance on the ground, and asked the obvious: “What is it?” Then they learned it was God’s generous response to their complaints about hunger.

Funny how, when you know longer have something—even if it wasn’t that great—that you really begin to miss it. The people of God, when they had lived in slavery in Egypt, making bricks under a brutally hot sun and an equally brutal Pharaoh, apparently had food to eat. Maybe it was a lot. Or maybe not enough, considering the calories one would need to consume to be able to do the work

they had to do each day for hours on end. But with stomachs growling in the present desert lands, their memories of meals gone by seemed to grow like a proverbial fish story: “Back in Egypt, our meals were this big!” Suddenly what they used to have seemed super-sized, with free trips to the salad bar. And Moses, serving as prophet and intermediary between God and the Israelites as they slowly make their way to God’s Promised Land, is lambasted by these hungry people. They blamed Moses for leading them into the wilderness to die.

But the Lord God spoke to Moses and promised to rain down bread from heaven for his chosen people, so that they would not go hungry. It would be enough...that is, enough for each day. What the Lord God was doing, in his wisdom, was giving his beloved people opportunity to place their trust in him, that God would provide enough each and every day. The word *manna* itself in the Hebrew can be rendered as, literally, the question “What is it?” That’s basically how the flaky stuff they discovered on the ground got its name.

And once the Israelites learned what it was, they also learned how to gather it and prepare it for meals for each day. It was nothing fancy, but it was solid fare going down the gullet, intended to nourish and strengthen. It wasn’t possible to gather enough to keep some in a pack for the next day or the next week, but the Israelites simply had to trust that the Lord God would keep giving them some manna every morning. And so it was that manna would form the basis for their daily living in the starkness of the wilderness. A gift from God.

Perhaps manna had a consistency like so many other grains that grow in the fields—grains that form the basis for daily living for various groups of people throughout the world. Like the *wheat* across our nation’s plains used to make our loaves of bread... to the corn pounded into meal for *tortillas* to our south... to the *naan* flatbread that serves as staple in India and Pakistan... to *lefse*, that Norwegian bread made of potatoes and flour... to the *pita* we use here in our communion meal that peoples of the Middle East and the Mediterranean areas regularly consume ...well, the list could go on. It is clear that what can be made into cakes and breads and thick porridges could sustain a population for a long time, and sometimes would be the only thing available for food. Nothin’ fancy, but solid fare going down the gullet. Such grains as these have been substantial enough to form the basis for daily living.

Look out at those tables in the Gathering Space. You see all kinds of breads to eat. Some are fancier than others, but all are basically simple. Made of simple items. Solid fare to go down our gullets. And the money we donate to the World Hunger Appeal for those loaves will provide for people around the world—so that more grains can be grown, and then prepared for cakes and breads and thick porridges to sustain men, women, and children each day. ‘Cause each day finds people hungry.

You know, that’s what is happening in our Gospel lesson today. The people get hungry. Turns out that the people who have been so recently fed by Jesus (our story from last week’s Gospel lesson) seek Jesus once more. They recall the story of the manna in the wilderness which fed their ancestors, and suddenly Jesus looks to them like Moses—hey, let’s go to this Jesus, and he’ll get us more bread. At first they try not to appear so obvious in their desire for another meal. Yet Jesus sees through them. He knows they just want to be fed another substantial and miraculous meal from his hands. He has become a means to an end for them, not the end itself. But he wants to be their end. Jesus doesn’t offer them anything to eat, and instead suggests they seek bread that won’t grow stale, that won’t perish—a bread only God can give through his Son. So then they get

downright blunt with Jesus: *What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness...*

But Jesus will not jump through hoops in order to have their trust. He will not placate the crowds with more loaves of bread—since he knew that placating would only suffice for awhile. They'll eventually get hungry again. Instead, Jesus pointedly tells them, OK, go ahead and look back at the story of the manna in the wilderness. They brought up the subject, after all. Jesus says it was not Moses who gave the manna. It was God. And that manna, while sustenance for that particular time and place, is a thing of the past, not eternal and abiding. God is doing a new thing this day. Only God can give the true bread that never perishes, the bread which gives life to the world.

See, the people's error was equating Jesus with Moses. They needed to equate Jesus with God. The true bread from heaven is being given now, today, says Jesus. (And he's not talking about manna. He's not talking about the barley loaves. He is talking about himself.)

Still misunderstanding, still confused, the people say to Jesus, "Give us that bread then—that's what we want. That eternal stuff you're talking about. That bread from heaven. Give us that." What's for supper, Jesus?

And Jesus' response actually doesn't offer any more clarity to them. He answers with these words: *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* Just as the wilderness-wandering Israelites looked at the manna on the ground and asked "What is it?" the people coming out to Jesus now turn away from looking at his hands for a barley loaf, turn away from looking to see if there are baskets of free food at his feet to glean from, and suddenly are forced to look right at Jesus, as they wonder in their befuddled minds "**Who are you?**"

We still get befuddled. In our sinful human nature, we may say in our conversations with God some days "What's for supper? What is this? Who are you?" Because some days our neediness and brokenness make us very hungry, and we go seeking, searching, desiring something, not always knowing what it is we seek and what it is we really need. Some days we will lack trust in our Lord to sustain us. Some days we will think what Jesus offers either too simple or too theologically ethereal to feed us.

But Jesus says all that **he** is **will** sustain us. Both in the challenges of this earthly life, and in the precious kingdom life to come. Jesus is our manna. Jesus declares that **he himself** will form the ongoing basis for our daily living. He will dwell in us, through the power of his Spirit. He will be the bread for our journey.

The Church stands today, declaring that Jesus Christ offers solid fare. Substantial. Nourishing. Powerful. Nothin' fancy, but a genuine love and goodness to fill us up and keep us going. **AMEN.**