

**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (b)**  
**1 Kings 19:4-8 Ephesians 4:25--5:2 John 6:35, 41-51**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**August 8, 2021 (Traditional)**

We spend several weeks in a row letting it sink in, what Jesus means when he says “I am the bread of life.” Two weeks ago he served a free meal to more than 5000 people. *That* food was easy for them to take. Who passes up a free meal? Last week, though, in the gospel, he started pushing them: don't just take a free meal. How about the one who gives it to you? So he's re-channeling the whole sense of the story, isn't he? He's moving away from the good food that satisfies their stomachs...and he obviously wants them to have that. But now he's talking about a different kind of food, that only he can give. Next week...you'll see...Jesus moves in so close—he gets so personal with them—that the majority gets turned off. They reject him. In today's gospel, things are just starting to get uncomfortable.

Have you ever been packed into an elevator with a bunch of strangers? There's that tension—everyone just wants to get out. Well, you can think of today's gospel kind like that: Jesus is squeezing in close on these people today, packing them into a very small elevator with him. Last week he was saying, “now, instead of focusing just on the good stuff God gives you, start considering—just considering—a relationship with me, the one who gives it to you” This week, he's clear: If you want a future, then you *need me*, he says. You need to take me as your bread. You have to get on this elevator with me. Or let me on your elevator, however you want to think of it. In other words, if you want a future, you cannot avoid dealing with Jesus, in one way or the other. To have a life, you'll either have to try to go around Jesus, or through Jesus. Either way, Jesus is there, standing in your way, and you'll have to acknowledge him. He's pulling us into a pretty tight elevator. And like I say—next week it gets *real* tight. So already you can see how our modern world has a lot of trouble with this.

He's saying, he's not just a nice idea that you have to accept. He's not someone whom you can call on certain days and stay away from on others. You cannot stand back from Jesus and decide whether or not you're going to fit him into your life or not. Think of your husband or wife, or your closest friend, or your parents. People who are part of your life every day. They're not ideas in your head, are they? No—these are people who get right on the elevator with you. They're in your space. They question you. They will ask you to do stuff with them. At the same time, they have a life of their own and they're free. You cannot contain them. But you know you can trust them, so you open the door when they knock—and the people who love you keep on knocking to get in, don't they? That's how God wants his Word to be in our lives. A daily power, a daily relationship, a daily conversation we experience. But as long as we try to have it on our terms, like today's world wants everything, we won't experience it.

I think of our bible studies here at St. John's. Just being part of a small group, or a bible study, can feel like getting on an elevator with other people, that's a little too small. At least at first. But then the Holy Spirit gets to work through the Word. And it's not long

before you realize what a gift we have here—we might not be completely comfortable with each other on the elevator at first, it's hard for us to trust other people. But then we see that we're gathered together around **someone** here whom we can all trust completely.

The Risen Christ is there with us, opening us up through the Word, helping us to listen and see things from his perspective, which is always liberating, always surprising. Personally, I rarely feel like I go home from a Bible study at St. John's with some big new stockpile of worldly information that I can use in my life. (When I teach I do try to give some information occasionally). But rather, when I go home from a Bible study, I feel like a weight has been taken off me. I have become less, and it's beautiful, because God has become more. I don't feel squeezed into myself so much anymore. I don't feel so concerned about where my next meal is going to come from, because when I'm with God's people and there's love and trust, I'm also with the One who feeds me all my meals. He has drawn very close—and he's done that through my fellow members here at St. John's. The Holy Spirit doesn't want to be contained in our controlling hearts. He wants his fire to leap from one person to the next till we're all on fire with him.

The gospel also reminds me of that history class I had in high school: I thought it was the most boring, uninteresting class ever. Until halfway through the semester, a new teacher came in, and suddenly, history became one of the best classes I ever had. Same book, same homework, same study questions, talked about all the same topics. But this new guy was throwing every bit of his heart and soul and interest into what he taught. Within a few minutes, we were engaged, we were interested, we were throwing ourselves into that class, we were learning and being challenged and changed by what we were studying. And it was because of something beyond words. We were getting the teacher along with the subject matter.

That's what Jesus is moving towards, with us, in this gospel lesson. He's saying, you can pick apart every atom that God has created in the universe, learn all the physics of creation and the wonders of the universe and this world, you can have those beautiful relationships with the ones you love, you can eat all that beautiful worldly food—and it's good food, it's from God! But that food dies. Now, Jesus says, I want to give you myself as the bread of life. You won't just have your loved ones, you won't just have the worldly learning, you won't just have a full stomach for a day—you'll have the one who created it all, and who gave you your loved ones, and who never stops feeding you. That teacher threw himself completely into what he taught. Well, Jesus gave everything, he died on the cross, to bring us, and everything in creation, back to the relationship with God we were supposed to have in the first place.

The Church of God has always had challenges in front of it that look insurmountable. There's always a Goliath out there on the battlefield that looks too big for us to handle. Today Goliath takes many forms. But he always has one major aim—to keep us alone in our elevators, mistrustful of everyone. And today our temptation is to grab hold of what we might call an internet religion, a faith where we can point and click on what we want to hear and want to receive. But the body of Christ—the church—what we're doing here together at St. John's...this is harder than internet religion, especially at first. Because

we've got to get on the elevator together. This is where we listen, and learn humility. With you and me, forgiveness has to be a face-to-face reality; nice words about love and inclusion aren't going to work in the life of the real church. This is where doctrine becomes something you have to live out towards your neighbor. Church is where baby Christians become mature Christians. Church is where the idea of faith becomes...faith.

And being here together is not about our old friendships, our choices, our personalities, our histories, our dumb mistakes or our big accomplishments. That's all water under the bridge, as far as God is concerned. You and I can trust that we always have a clean slate to work with together. The past is the past. Jesus has opened up a future for you and me to live together. We have been completely forgiven. When you trust that, the elevator opens up and becomes this big beautiful place, an open field full of new possibilities, in which we can run together—a place where you can be safe and free and where you can trust that people are going to be respectful and honest and open and forgiving.

We can't manufacture that freedom or be fakey about it. We're all sinners and it all depends on God's forgiveness for us. It all depends on Jesus giving himself to us: feeding us with Himself. "This is my body," he says. "This is my blood." He provides us with what we need most. When we trust that, we can love each other and never lose a thing.