

Good morning. GOOD MORNING! I was so inspired by how loud you were last time; I am going to keep this tradition up. I am finding out you are a lively congregation, and it fills me with joy to be among you.

We enter yet another Sunday that discusses bread, this time as the Bread of Life. A bread that has come down from heaven. A bread that abides both with us and within us.

The gospel shows us the truth about groups of people as well. Jesus makes an announcement, and immediately people complain. Well, the gospel says they “disputed among themselves.” They argued. They disagreed. A few were in a bad mood and figured others might like to be in a bad mood too. My siblings and I often disputed with our parents about exactly what they meant by “go to your room.” They never told us WHEN to go to our rooms or HOW LONG it should take us to get there. Children are natural theologians. I imagine these were the kinds of debates people were having about Jesus’ pronouncements.

We are a people who feel easily aggrieved. We don’t like change. Jesus tells the crowd, “I am the Bread of Life” and the crowd starts grumbling. Someone says, “Who does this guy think he is to come in here and start changing things?” Someone else adds, “What the heck does that mean?” Jesus is saying some pretty big, difficult, things, and now everyone is upset.

How does Jesus respond? He doubles down! He digs himself in. I don’t know about you, but if someone came in and started stirring the pot, I’d be upset. Then if I said, “STOP STIRRING THE POT!” and the person with the stick in hand said, “I SAID WHAT I SAID!” I’d be ready for some disputing.

Remember, this comes just after Jesus has fed them all! Jesus has taken those five loaves and bread and two fish and fed this crowd. He fed them all until they were full. No one is hungry at all! People

have seen the miracle for themselves and now Jesus is explaining what this miracle might mean. And they don’t like what he is saying. It is difficult. It seems outrageous. Jesus is going on and on about how important he is, and nobody is having it.

What is Jesus saying? He is saying, “Look you all, you just ate some bread and fish. But you will eat food your whole lives and are going to die anyway. Your exercise routine won’t save you. Your Whole 30 or vegetarian diet won’t save you. Your 16 medications and 4 medical specialists won’t save you. All these things will improve the quality of your life, but you are still going to die. Your ancestors died. You will die. Everyone is going to die.”

Can you imagine if I got up here and preached this to you this Sunday? Good morning, Christ Lutheran Church. GOOD MORNING! I just wanted to let you know that you are all going to die! You would be escorting me, or have Pr. Jana escorting me, to a new internship site pretty quick. But Jesus doesn’t stop there.

Jesus says, I know a way you don’t have to die! But guess what, that way is me! I am the Bread of Life! Whoever eats my flesh will live forever. Oh, drink my blood too.” If anyone said this to me on the street, I would be crossing the street to get out of their way. That’s crazy talk.

This is where you might interrupt the sermon and say, “Intern Pastor Jory, that is Jesus, he IS the Bread of Life! We know if we believe in him that we will be saved. Luther said so! Pr. Jana says it all the time!” Very true, and very good point. But the people of Jesus’ time saw a man who grew up among them. They knew his family. Even though Jesus had fed a bunch of people with nothing, they couldn’t believe. He sounded crazy to them.

To be honest, if this happened today, I don’t know if I would believe it either. It is a hard proposition. We have almost 2000 years of hindsight now, to help us out. But if someone said this to me

today? Well, they would have to yell it at me, because I'd be on the other side of the street already walking away.

What is Jesus talking about in the Bible? How do we know God's promises are real? These are the questions I and my classmates are asked on nearly a daily basis in seminary. And you know what? There isn't one simple answer to them. We live in an age that demands simple answers to complex problems. We move away from difficulty and suffering, but usually that is where our answers are to be found. My seminary professors encourage me to dig deep into scripture and prayer. They tell us to sink into the writings of great thinkers and believers who have gone before us. They tell us to reflect with other pastors and spiritual directors to ask, "Where is God in all of this?"

Maybe that surprises you. Maybe that is not what you were expecting to hear. As a pastor in training, you might think that I have all the answers, or will by the time I graduate from seminary. Who knows, I might! But right now, I wish I could answer all of your questions easily and simply.

Several years ago, a very good friend of mine died at the age of 26. One sunny spring day we were talking and laughing like crazy over lunch at my house. We were so happy to be alive together over that shared meal. A few days later, she took her own life. It was sudden, unannounced, completely unexpected. There was no note. None of her friends or family could believe that this happy woman so full of life was gone.

Not one of us had an answer. It shook my faith in the world. I was totally undone. Where was God in all this? How could God let something like this happen?

None of us ever found out why she took her life that year. There was no closure. No answer that could satisfy us. There was less

light in the world with her gone. It stayed dark for me, for a long time.

Jesus in today's gospel is calling to remember that it is the spiritual life that feeds us in ways that the physical world cannot. It is the Holy One that sustains us when all of our best laid plans for the future end up collapsing in front of us and burn to the ground. When that sure footing we have relied upon for so long is suddenly pulled out from under us.

Even Jesus faced death, and I don't mean his crucifixion. I mean the death of his friend Lazarus. Scripture tells us in his friend's death, he was undone. He wept. Even Jesus was powerless before grief and sorrow. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was overcome with grief. He couldn't avoid life's sorrow. Even he was met by the unexpected, even he was undone.

When a family member is diagnosed with a terrible illness. When a child is taken suddenly in an accident. When the pet we have loved so long and so faithfully comes to the end of its life. Jesus tells us, all things come to an end. All things, and even we too will die. Jesus is there with us in our tears and hurt. Jesus knows our sadness. But he also says, death is not the end.

Later on, in the gospel of John (10:10–11) Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus came into the world, faced the rejection of the people he knew and grew up with. He was rejected by the religion that he loved. Abandoned by friends, he was tortured and put to death on a cross. But his story doesn't end here. No. He was raised again. Jesus was raised from the dead. It is here, in the place of desolation, in the place of ruin and emptiness, that of a tomb, that we too might begin to believe that there might be life.

After the death of my friend, I spent many late nights, walking in the dark angrily confronting God. Confronting the silence that my friend's life had become. Reaching the limits of my own understanding.

For a long time, there was only silence. I thought God had turned away, or did not exist. I spent so much time talking to God, and God didn't answer back. There was only a wall. Every time I prayed it was like opening a drawer that I had emptied. I kept opening the drawer expecting something to be in it, but it was always empty when I looked.

I took those long walks for months in all kinds of weather. But it was only in hindsight that I could see God was with me in all that sorrow. Though I didn't stop blaming God, accusing God, yelling at God in my hurt—even stopped believing—the Loving One was there in that place of desolation. The Sorrowful One was with me in the very lowest point. But I couldn't see God. I couldn't feel God at all.

The great revelation for me was the Loving One was present through the people in my life: those who walked along side me, those who were companions in my grief and anger, who hugged me, who questioned with me. I felt those hands. I heard those voices. I saw those feet walking beside me. The Holy One was with me in all of those people, in all of those moments.

Jesus says, later in the Gospel of John, "He who has seen me, has seen the Father." But it was only in hindsight that I could see Jesus, the Love of God, in all of those hands, that care, their love for me.

Jesus is always bringing life to where there has been death. He does this because he is the Bread of Life. He does this because he is always about his Father's work. And Jesus' Father is a God who

is a Creator—who is a life-giving and life-sustaining God. So too, with Jesus.

God's miracle of life wasn't bringing back my friend from the dead like Lazarus, as much as I wanted it. As much as I prayed it might happen. God's miracle was calling me out of the dark tomb of my grief and sorrow. Jesus was calling me, slowly, through so many loving hands to come out of the other side of that night and into the new morning.

This was not the morning I wanted, where I might have breakfast with my friend again, but a morning that was there waiting for me to arrive. Jesus said, keep walking. Keep walking. The sun will eventually rise.

Or as a friend and salty mentor likes to say, God didn't carry you this far to drop you on your behind. But he doesn't use the word behind.

God always finds a way to bring new life into our lives. To bring us out of death and sorrow, but the Loving One doesn't intend for us to go it alone. In the rooms of 12 step recovery the very first step tells the new member they are not alone. The first step is, "We admitted we were powerless, and that our lives had become unmanageable." Not I was powerless, not just my life was unmanageable, but we, us, our lives.

This is because they believe that no one can or should overcome their struggles alone. That it takes all of us together to not only face a problem, but to walk with one another into new life. However tentative or uncertain that new life might appear.

But this isn't just the truth for 12 step recovery. It is our truth as well. The church is not an "I" proposition. The church is a "we" proposition. God happens between one another. God is made present in all of those hands that held me, wiped away my tears,

and walked with me in my sorrow. The body of Christ, and the Kingdom of God is a “we” proposition. We do not do it alone. We do it together.

When we gather together each week for worship, when we hold one another in prayer, when we sing together, when we cry together. God is with us. Jesus is with us, and also within us. In the breaking of the bread, in the reading of the word, but maybe most visibly when we love one another. Today I might not have faith, but you might have a little. Tomorrow you might be in sorrow, but I might not be. God is calling us together, to love one another. To accompany one another because we can't do it alone. I can't. Because we are not meant to do it alone. You aren't.

But all of us together, with God's help are sustained through the best and worst of things. The peaks and valleys. We, together, are fed at this table, in the bread and wine, and through our care of one another.

Because it is together—we have been called, we have been gathered together—that we are lifted up into that new life that Christ has promised us that is both already here, and still yet to come.