

At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴² They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?"

⁴³ "Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. ⁴⁴ "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. ⁴⁶ No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (John 6:41-51)

What Kind of Bread is Jesus?

Sometimes when we're in the grocery store, my wife will say to me, "I want to get some good bread." In our family, "good bread" isn't a brand. It's what we call any bread that's baked fresh and that you have to cut up with a bread knife. Good bread can never be that stuff that you get in plastic bags. We buy that and use it for toast and sandwiches. But good bread is a treat. In fact, when my wife buys a loaf of good bread, she plans on it lasting less than 24 hours, because our kids will snack on it all day long. We love "good bread." So when I was thinking about the words that Jesus spoke in our gospel lesson this morning, my mind went there. In these verses, Jesus calls himself bread. He doesn't want us to think of cheap bread or stale bread or tasteless bread. He's good bread, the best bread possible. He calls himself the bread of life and the bread that came down from heaven. This morning, we want to reflect on what he meant by that. **What kind of bread is Jesus?**

I.

He is the bread from heaven. One way that we identify good bread in my family is where it came from. Bread from the Polish or the Italian bakery is much better than even the "good bread" from the grocery store. Jesus said he came from heaven. Of course, we're coming into the conversation in the middle this morning. For the last two weeks, you heard parts of this conversation. This morning, we come in right after Jesus said that and then promised that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. When I say things like that, I intend for that to be comforting. I mean to use that tremendous promise of God to strengthen your faith so that you can face life in a sinful world. I would be shocked if you reacted the way the people by the shores of the Sea of Galilee did.

John tells us, **"At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.'" They were offended. If Jesus came from heaven, then he wasn't just a human being. Jesus was claiming to be the Son of God. And that bothered them. When Jesus said these words, he was within walking distance of the village where he grew up and these people asked, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?"** We've seen this reaction before. They knew him personally and they knew his family and they just refused to accept that this man that they had known since he was a small child could have come from heaven.

What was their problem? Very simply, it was unbelief. Jesus announced the good news that he would give them eternal life if they trusted in him as their Savior. But that's a powerful message. No one can hear it without it having an effect on them. Every time someone hears that Jesus is their Savior, one of three things happens. Either an unbeliever is converted into a believer or a believer is strengthened in his faith or an unbeliever is hardened in his unbelief because he pushes away the power of God in the gospel. That's true for you and me as well. This message never leaves us unaffected.

Sadly, what happened on this day was hardening. Jesus had done an extraordinary miracle: he fed thousands of people with a little boy's lunch, and then he proclaimed forgiveness and life. And they rejected it all. And they grumbled about him. What a sad outcome for so great an opportunity! It's natural for us who do believe to wonder why it came out that way for them. Why aren't they more like us? Well, Jesus said, **"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."** No one

can believe unless God himself gives him or her faith. We do not decide to believe. We don't reach a crisis and then invite Jesus into our hearts. We don't hear clever and convincing arguments and then make up our minds. We don't believe because that's the way we were raised. We believe because God did a miracle in our hearts. He came to us in the gospel and he created faith in us. He drew us and now we believe. Jesus goes on to say that we are taught by God. God teaches us through the message, the good news. God himself makes that good news work that miracle of faith.

Jesus said, **"Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me."** If you really are taught by God, if you really believe the message of the Bible, you must be a Christian. You must believe in Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of the world. Jesus went on to say, **"No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father."** In the Old Testament, God told Moses that no one can see his face and live. St. Paul says that God lives in unapproachable light and that no one can see him. But Jesus had indeed seen God because he is the Son of God.

That is not a well understood point today. A few weeks ago, I was reading a book and it was opposed to people like us, Christians who hold to doctrinal truths. It made an interesting statement. It said that those people – meaning us – have decided that Unitarians aren't Christians. Do you know what a Unitarian is? It's someone who rejects the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Most Unitarians are also Universalists, meaning that they believe that all roads lead to heaven, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, whatever. That is very much the prevailing attitude of the world today. Islam is held up as a religion of peace and we're supposed to consider Muslims to be believers in God. But Unitarians and Universalists, Muslims and even Jews all reject Jesus. They all reject the truth that he is the bread that came from heaven – that he is truly the Son of God who gave his life to pay for our sins and that he will raise us up on the last day. Anyone who rejects that is not going to heaven.

So this is the part of the sermon where we should all slap each other on the back and congratulate each other on the fact that we do believe, right? Not really. Certainly, the fact that you and I believe is a good thing and we do rejoice in each other's faith. But we need to be careful that we don't lose sight of how we got that faith. One of the greatest errors of the Christian church in modern times is looking down our noses at people without faith and assuming that there's something wrong with them. And of course, without actually putting in so many words, that means that we think there's something right with us. That simply is not the case. Remember, no one comes to Jesus unless God draws him. Left to ourselves, we would be just like those people who rejected Jesus because they were offended by the idea that he came down from heaven. The truth is, before we had faith, we fought against the gospel with all our strength. We did not want to be converted. But God drew us – he did that miracle and gave us faith. It's all a gift of his grace. It all comes from the bread who came down from heaven.

II.

The whole idea behind this bread image is faith. Jesus is using a metaphor. He's trying to make clear to us what faith is and what benefits we have from it. When my kids eat that good bread in our house, it tastes great. But it does more than that. It takes away hunger. It provides nutrients and energy and growth. In the past, bread was the major part of most people's meals. It was the source of life. So it is with Jesus. **What kind of bread is Jesus? He is the bread of life.**

Jesus said, **"I am the bread of life."** What does that mean? Very simply, it means he is the bread that gives life. Jesus said, **"Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die."** In the Old Testament, God did an incredible miracle, and he did it six days a week for forty years. God provided bread from heaven. The Israelites simply went out and picked it up off the ground. They called it "manna" which is Hebrew for "what is it?" But even though God provided that miracle food to keep body and soul together for forty years, they still died. That whole generation died in the wilderness. Even Moses didn't make it to the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb did.

Physical food is not enough to give eternal life. We need more. We need the bread that comes down from heaven. That bread gives us eternal life. Jesus said that if we eat this bread, we will not die. A little earlier he said that he who believes has eternal life. It's yours right now. But wait a minute. Eating this bread means that we won't die, and if eating the bread is really a metaphor for faith, and if we have eternal life right

now, why do we have funerals? Every Christian in every generation before us has died. Does that mean that Jesus' promise wasn't true? Or does it mean that their faith wasn't strong enough?

Of course, it means neither. At the very beginning of our reading, Jesus said that he would raise us at the last day. Eternal life is not life in this world as we know it now. We will all die physically, unless Jesus comes back first. And that's not all bad. I spend a lot of time visiting hospitals and nursing homes. And I have to ask, would you want to live forever crippled and in pain? Would you want to live forever in this world, where we have to worry about crime and recessions and losing our jobs? Would you want to live forever here where the devil and unbelievers constantly torment us? Would you want to live forever with a heart that struggles with doubt and temptation and weakness and pride?

That's not what Jesus was promising. He was promising eternal life with him. When we die, we will go to heaven. But even more important, when the time comes, Jesus will return and judge the world. He will sweep away all sin and sorrow and death and make this world perfect. He will purify our hearts and take away all sin and weakness. He will make our bodies perfect and they will live that forever. And the miracle for us today is that all of that is already ours. It's bought and paid for and it belongs to us. I have kids just at the age when they're learning to drive. Imagine that I decided to go out and buy a car for each one of them. I registered it in their name and I put it into storage and I told them that as soon as they have a driver's license, they could drive that car. The car would be theirs, registered in their name. But they wouldn't have it in their hands just yet. That's the way eternal life is. It is ours, right now. Just like a teenager could dream about getting that car and all the fun he or she is going to have with it, we can look forward with joy to that day when we get to take eternal life out for a spin. That reality gives us strength right now while we live in a world that has all those other problems and difficulties.

All that is ours simply because we have faith, faith that God himself gave us. Jesus compares that faith to eating bread. Then he says one more thing to tie it all together. He says that the bread of life is his flesh which he will give for the world. Jesus is not talking about communion here. But he is talking about the cross. What makes our faith work is the cross. We Christians trust in something, we trust that Jesus died and paid for our sin. That means that we have our eyes open about our sin. One of the problems of unbelief is that it denies sin. When someone in our society talks about feeling guilty, what do they always hear? "You shouldn't feel so bad. You're a good person." Christians know better than that. We're not good people. We're sinners. Every day, we hurt people who love us. Every day, we disobey God in our words and actions, in our thoughts and our feelings. Every day, we act as though we were the most important people on earth. We earn hell every single day. But Jesus died and paid for all that sin. Then he rose and forgave us. And faith clings to that promise. We eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood when we trust that he has done all that for us. And we have eternal life. It's ours now. And we will enjoy it forever. Could there be any better bread than that? Amen.