

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 15, 2021

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude: "Jesus, Name Above All Names"

Arr. John F. Wilson

Gathering

WELCOME & LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

* CALL TO WORSHIP

Liturgist: Let us give thanks to the Lord with all our being.

All: **In the company of the upright, let us honor God for the blessings we have received.**

Liturgist: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

All: **We will praise the Lord, for His goodness endures forever.**
Psalm 111:1, 10

* **All Singing:** **495 "Come, All You People, Praise Our God"**

* GOD'S GREETING

* GOD'S PEOPLE GREETING ONE ANOTHER

* **All Singing:** **532 "Be Still, For the Presence"**

Children ages 4–7 may come forward for a blessing before they leave for "Children in Worship."

CHILDREN'S BLESSING

Children: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also, with you.**

Reconciliation

Liturgist: Lord, you come to us, but we do not recognize you; you call, but we do not follow; you command, but we do not obey, you bless us but we do not thank you.

All: **Forgive us and help us.**

Liturgist: Lord, you accept us, but we do not accept others; you forgive us but we do not forgive those who wrong us.

All: **Forgive us and help us.**

All Singing: **636 "Kyrie"**

Silent Confession and Lament

Liturgist: Lord, you showed us how to carry out your mission, but we still insist on our own. You suffered and died for the sake of all, but we do not give up our comfortable lives.

All: **Forgive us and help us.**

Liturgist: Through Jesus Christ forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the richness of his grace.

All: **Praise be the name of the Lord, who forgives our iniquity and identifies with our sorrows.**

* **All Singing:** **543 "Now Thank We All Our God"**

Liturgist: Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 5:15-20

Proclamation

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Leader: We pray, Lord, that you will open the door of our hearts to receive you within our hearts. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All: **Amen.**

Scripture: John 6:1-15, 51-58

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: **Thanks be to God.**

Sermon: Eating in Eternity

* **All Singing:** 815 “Gift of Finest Wheat”

Dedication

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Sending

* **All Singing:** 43 “Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer”


BENEDICTION

Postlude: “God of Grace” Paul Manz
Tune: Cwm Rhondda

Worship Leaders

Pianist / Organist:	Dora Diephouse	Acolyte:	Trinity Simpson
Vocalist:	Aron Reppmann	Liturgist:	Jan Kosmal
Violinist:	Frances Boerman-Cornell	Prayer:	Arlo Compaan
Preacher:	Keith Starkenburg		

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Eating in Eternity
Keith Starkenburg

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.

Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

(John 6:1-15, 51-58)

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Many of you likely know how magic works in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy Pevensie, have been evacuated to a country home of a professor outside of London during World War II. In that home, they discover a wardrobe that is a portal to the land of Narnia. When they arrive, they find themselves caught in a conflict between the White Witch and Aslan over the land. Three of the Pevensies find their way to Aslan, who is about to finally defeat the White Witch. But, one of the Pevensies, Edmund, betrays them as he is entrapped into the service of the Witch. Edmund is rescued just

before the Witch was to have him killed, but it comes out that she has rights. In negotiation with Aslan, she reminds everyone that the Deep Magic of the Emperor means that “that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to kill.” Aslan, in secret, agrees to give his life to the Witch so that Edmund might live. But, as you know, Aslan comes back to life. Why? He says to Susan and Lucy, “though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still she did not know.” In this deeper magic, a willing victim offered on behalf of another makes it possible for “death” to “start working backward.”

In Narnia, there is a deep magic that keeps things going, keeps things organized. It’s the magic of fairness. It’s the magic of justice. It’s the magic of technology, of science. It’s the magic of doctors, lawyers, and education that aims at making us citizens. It’s a good magic. It keeps the trains running on time. It allows us to replace our knees of flesh with knees of metal and polymer. It provides vaccines and lights so that we can read at night. But, it is also gets used against the most vulnerable, in favor of those with the most power. The magical trains might run through that neighborhood, but not those neighborhoods. The magical food might be readily available in this town, but not so much in that one. The magical land might burn too much because we keep using too much of this and not enough of that. We also disagree on how to utilize the magic, and so we use meetings, judgments, protests and even weapons to determine how we use the magic. All of the meetings, judgments, protests and wars depend on the magic too. Its all magic. An imperfect magic, but magic nonetheless.

This story about Jesus feeding a crowd of five thousand in Bethsaida (see Mk 8.22 and Jn. 1.44 in connection to Philip) is more about the deeper magic of Narnia, about the deeper magic of our cosmos. The crowd had seen some deeper magic from Jesus already. They had seen Jesus heal a government official’s son (4.46-54). They had heard of a man who had been sick for almost forty years healed by Jesus on the Sabbath in Jerusalem (5.1-18). No doubt, a number of them wanted to be healed, or wanted those they love to be healed. They wanted more, and Jesus gave them more.

What does Jesus do for these hungry people? Jesus enacts what the Gospel of John calls a sign. He takes a normal and crucial day-to-day good, a normal and crucial day-to-day need – food and the need to eat – and uses it to shape the crowd and the disciples into people who can receive that good as a sign. He makes food and eating into a sign.

A sign of what? The food that he gives in this setting is meant to be a sign of, well, him. Jesus is the bread of life. If you come to Jesus (6.35), if you eat Jesus (6.51), if you believe in Jesus (6.29), then you will be receiving what he calls “eternal life” (6.27). Jesus says, “Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me” (6:57). Eternal life, or the life of the age, is the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit shared with human beings and the world, so that they might “live,” they might have “life” (6.51). The food is a sign of Jesus as the bearer of eternal life. Jesus makes eating, day to day meals with your family, with colleagues, with friend, with frenemies and even enemies, into a sign of him as a bearer of eternal life. What does that mean?

It will help to go back to the story a bit, and see what Jesus is trying to undo in his disciples. Jesus asks Philip a trick question, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Philip falls into the trap, and answers, “Six months wages would not be enough to buy bread for each of them to get a little.” Jesus, we cannot do it. There is not enough money to feed all of these people. Andrew tries to assist Philip, does just a little better, and says, “There is a boy here

who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" All they can see is the deep magic. Philip thinks that the world runs on having enough money. Andrew thinks that the world runs on people providing for themselves, protecting themselves, feeding themselves.

We know what that's like, we know what it's like to be Philip and Andrew. We might spend our days thinking of ways to make money. Maybe we are gorged with credits in the bank or maybe there's not really enough to pay rent. Either way, we spend our days mostly thinking of ways to make money. Or, maybe, we have worked hard to provide for our families and we also expect others to do the same. We are worried that that a family member who doesn't work, who can't hold onto a job, who doesn't handle their money, is going to take advantage of what we have built. We might worry that some government will take too much of what we have away. Maybe we are just tired of the neighbor's kids eating at our place. Maybe we are convinced that, yes, the world is screwed up and not enough people are fed. And so, we think we need the cleanest, purest, and most efficient policies, smartly and efficiently executed. If we just read enough books, attend enough protests, work out enough deals, we'll get everyone fed, we'll get everyone protected. Honestly, all of us, at some level, think that the world runs on legislation, interstates, balanced investment techniques, air conditioning, a working internet and plenty of gas. We know what's like to be Philip and Andrew.

To all of those thoughts, to all of those lifeways, Jesus says, "There's a deeper magic." Actually, Jesus does not correct their thinking as much as he takes them on a trip into the world as it is. Below and within the money, interstates, air conditioning and court cases is the crucified and risen Lord who transforms the world from the inside out. As it says in Colossians, "the firstborn from the dead . . . in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his Cross" (Phil. 1, 😊). Colossians doesn't say in this text that everything will be reconciled. Colossians says that everything is now reconciled. Jesus, by feeding these five thousand people in Bethsaida, is taking them on a trip into the world as it now is. The cosmos is a world in which God's fullness, God's own bountiful life, God's own abundant life, God's own eternal life, is available to us every single second of every single day of every single year of every single life that is lived in heaven and on earth.

Yes, the world runs on the deep magic of creation with all its notes and rhythms. But, given what God has given us in Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, all of those notes and rhythms have been taken up into a new key. That new key, that new life of the world, is a life in which we live as participants in God's own life. The deepest energy of the world, from which it constantly draws its, is a well that will never go dry. If Jesus can die and be resurrected, the world runs on a well that will never go dry. If the world runs on a well that will never go dry, our deaths, our suffering, our pain, our hurts, our needs, will finally become something of a means of our resurrection and the resurrection of all creation. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day" (John 6.54).

So, at the most basic level, all of this means that there is always enough. There is always enough food, there is always enough gifts, enough shelter, enough water, enough land, enough animals and human beings to become our family. Jesus feeds all of those people at Bethsaida because, as Alexander Schmemmann, a Christian theologian from the Eastern Orthodox tradition puts it, "all that exists is God's gift to humanity, and it all exists to make God known to

humanity, to make humanity's life communion with God. It is divine love made food, made life for humanity."¹ In Christ and the Spirit, creation is divine love made food. If God's very life has been given to us in every single part of our existence, then there is always enough to go around. There is no scarcity in God's life, and so there is no scarcity in God's creation. In fact, if this story tells us anything about Jesus, it is saying that there is more than enough, more than more than enough. By Christ and the Spirit, the baskets can always be full, both now and in the age to come.

And so, as Jesus demonstrates in this feeding, the only plausible way to participate in the deeper magic of God's eternal life is thanksgiving. The only plausible way to live with this reality is thanksgiving. The turning point of the feeding story when Jesus takes the loaves, and gives thanks (note how the text highlights this at 6.23). It is only when he gives thanks to God that Jesus distributes the bread and the fish to everyone who wished to eat, "as much as they wanted." Again, as Alexander Schmemmann writes, "by filling the world with thanksgiving, he transforms life . . . into life in God." It is not so much that are grateful because we can eat. Instead, in the words of the apostle Paul, we eat in order to "honor our Lord" in thanksgiving (Romans 14.6). Everything around us is divine love made food. But it is only in thanksgiving that we can receive the food as divine love.

If we don't receive the world in thanksgiving, then, mostly likely in our culture, we will interpret our world as a resource to which we have little responsibility. (I owe this way of putting it to Barbara Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*). When you head to TJ Maxx for a pair of socks, you'll find the socks on their shelves, property for their needs. Now, once you buy those socks, that pair of socks is your property, for your needs. A gift, as opposed to a resource, creates more durable – dare I say eternal - relationships. Thomas Aquinas called gift-giving and gratitude an "exchange of hearts."² When Grandma makes you socks, she has given you her heart, her very self. When God gives you your bread, God too has given you God's very heart. If you recognize that gift, then all you'll want to do with the rest of your life is offer your heart in return, is to offer your life in thanksgiving to the God who feeds you.

If the Spirit is doing anything with what I'm saying today, you'll probably start to wonder how it is that we can encounter our reality, our world, our contexts for what they are as God's gift.

The first thing to say is that even the offering of thanksgiving is a gift to us. Jesus is being depicted in this story as the one who offers thanksgiving to God on our behalf. Thanksgiving is not something that we need to dig up out of ourselves, or work up from the floor of our being. When Jesus gave thanks at the Lord's Supper, he said very clearly that this is "for you," for us. Jesus Christ is the thanksgiving that all of us have such difficulty offering. No matter how ungrateful you are today, Jesus Christ is grateful on your behalf.

And, yet, the Holy Spirit brings us into Christ's orbit, and we too can become grateful in and with Jesus Christ who walks with us in the Spirit each and every day.

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*.

² This interpretation comes from Stephen Andrew Jones' synthesis of Thomas Aquinas' description of gift and gratitude in *Summa Theologica* II-II, Qu. 106. See his dissertation at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42637014.pdf>.

And so, I offer a couple of suggestions. The Lord's Supper is also called the Eucharist. Eucharist simply means thanksgiving. Maybe John Calvin was right, then, when he argued that God's people shouldn't hold back from the Lord's Supper as many did in the medieval church, partaking only a once or twice a year or so. Maybe John Calvin was right to argue that God's people, if they are to learn thanksgiving in their bodies as well as their souls, could, fittingly partake in the Lord's Supper each and every week. We eat God's food multiple times a day. Coming to the Lord's table of thanksgiving multiple times in a month seems more than fitting. If the apostle Paul is right to say that the Lord's Supper is a "partaking in the body of Christ" (I Cor. 10.16), then, by the Spirit, the more we partake of the grateful Christ, the more grateful we become.

I also think that most of us will need to learn how to learn from folks who are, frankly, by the gift of the Spirit, leaning into the gifts of creation with more depth than many of us. Basil Brave Heart comes to mind. Basil is a ninety-year-old Lakota leader and committed Christian from Pine Ridge Reservation, which is near where I grew up in South Dakota. He tells stories about how his grandmother taught him forgiveness from the gifts of creation. His grandmother once told him that, although it is difficult, she wanted Basil to learn how to forgive those responsible for the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. For many of us, this event is long past, barely remembered. In Lakota culture, and in Native culture in the U.S. more generally, this is still a deep wound in Lakota culture. This is how Basil relates what his grandmother taught:

"...my grandmother said something that Christ said on the cross: they don't know what they did. They will have to live with this. We don't have to hate and retaliate and avenge these things that happened to the Lakota people. The Creator has a way to do this, but believe me, it would be done with compassion and love. That's the way, the way we want ...

Here's another time my grandmother taught me about forgiveness. We used to go out and pick cherries and plums. Before we started picking the fruit, she would take a little bread and some dried meat, and we would go sit down on the canvas, and then she'd make a prayer: 'These plums are our relatives, and we're going to pick them in very careful, kind, and sacred way. I don't want anyone to break any branches. We're going to take what we need and leave some for someone else . . . Then she said, 'When you were going up, somebody stepped on flowers – not on purpose. On the way back, follow your footsteps, see if you can find that flower. Then stoop down and smell it. Because you stepped on the flower, it is going to withhold its fragrance? No, it must still share it. That's nature's way of forgiveness. Even though you stepped on it.'"³

Basil's grandmother was willing to forgive those responsible for killing hundreds of her people, and those responsible for what seemed to be the final blow to her people's sovereignty at that time. Why was she able to do this? She had learned somehow that cherries, plums, and flowers are not simply fuel for the imperfect machines of our bodies. She had learned, somehow, that cherries, plums and flowers bear the life of the one who died and rose again, and that their lives bear witness to the crucified and risen Christ. She had learned how to see the world for what it is, and thus become grateful for what it gives her and all those around her, even her enemies. She had learned that the creation is crucified love made food, and she couldn't take her eyes off it.

³ This story can be found in *Sharing the Wisdom of Time*, by Pope Francis.

If we are going to learn what it is for creation to be crucified love made food, it will probably mean being around people like Basil Brave Heart and his grandmother, wherever they may found. May we find them whether they may be found.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.