

Devotions for the Eleventh Week after Pentecost, August 9-13

Monday of Pentecost 11 – Prayer of the Week

Gracious Father, Your blessed Son came down from heaven to be the true bread that gives life to the world. Grant that Christ, the bread of life, may live in us and we in Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

My father's cousin used to work at a television station in a small Midwest city. This was early TV when advertising was local and locally produced. One day he gave my parents a tour of the station. He showed them the many props which were used for the commercials they watched every night. As the announcer read the advertisement for Wells Blue Bunny ice cream the camera focused on a bowl heaped with, not ice cream, but mashed potatoes. They looked like ice cream, however, and the power of suggestion along with the somewhat grainy quality of early televisions was enough. Everyone thought they were looking at a bowl of ice cream. One of the station's primary sponsors was a local bread company. Each night the announcer read statements lauding the quality, freshness, and wholesomeness of the local baker's product. But when my father held the loaf of bread which was shown every night, it was hard and crusted in mold.

We note in this prayer that God's blessed Son came from heaven to be the true bread that gives life to the world. Technology, our culture, and media have often made us very suspicious of truth claims. My father said he really could never hear those announcements about that bread quite the same way ever again. He found himself looking at the loaves in the store suspiciously. Were they as moldy as the sample he saw on TV last night?

But this prayer is not selling bread or ice cream. This prayer is observing something about God who transcends our doubt. We pray that this living bread, Jesus Christ, lives in us and we in Him. He is the true bread. He brings life to the world. In a font he brought life to you. In Word and Supper, he continues to pour life into you that you may live in Him.

Tuesday of Pentecost 11 – I Kings 19:1-8

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."³ Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers."⁵ And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat."⁶ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again.

⁷ And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” ⁸ And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

“Pastor, would you come with me?” The older member of my parish was asking I would come along on a visit to his son. Of course, I went along. But along with his wife, I did not have a great expectation for the success of this mission. Their son was deep into an addiction to prescription pain killers. It was a scene which you can imagine. Addiction does terrible things to people. The place was a mess. The son was a mess too. He did not want to hear what his father and I might say, so he was a little hostile. But his father came in love and this time he let his father and me inside to talk.

The younger man was dying, not in the traditional sense of dying, but he was dying what commentators call in this day a death of despair. He simply had no hope. If things continued as they were heading, he would not live long. Elijah lies under a broom tree in today’s reading and asks God to end his life. He too had given up hope. There are many reasons people lose hope in our day. The world assesses us by the cruel measures of wealth, worldly success, and how many likes our latest post received. It streams images of beautiful, successful people across our screens in an unrelenting message of “you don’t measure up.” Social media have served to isolate us more than connect us. Some have never learned or forgotten how to be a friend or have healthy relationships with others. The constant mantra of self-sufficiency and a world defined by science and technology makes for a very thin gruel to sustain life. Many are starving, like this young man, they are starving to death. Perhaps you see them on your drive the grocery store like I do. Perhaps you know them as friends, family, even children as the member of my parish knew his son.

The angel touched Elijah, woke him, and gave him something to eat. It must have been quite the nutrient dense lunch because with a second helping, Elijah went forty days and nights. Christ would feed the starving of this world too, and not only those whose nutritional needs are not being met, but also those who need to find hope and satisfaction in a life which is good. He and we do not measure people with the world’s measuring stick. He and we love despite the person not because of what they are or have done. He and we are willing to be uncomfortable with them. He and we see value in a creature of God, intrinsically bestowed by the blood of Christ, a value which cannot be taken away by failure or drugs or sin. And Christ will give them hope.

Wednesday of Pentecost 11 – Psalm 34:1-8

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

² My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.

³ Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!

- ⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.
- ⁵ Those who look to him are radiant,
and their faces shall never be ashamed.
- ⁶ This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him
and saved him out of all his troubles.
- ⁷ The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
- ⁸ Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
- ⁹ Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,
for those who fear him have no lack!
- ¹⁰ The young lions suffer want and hunger;
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

I am the second youngest of seven siblings. As a result, I did not spend a lot of time with small children in my home growing up. I was one of the small children. That changed when my elder siblings started to have families of their own, when was an adolescent. I was charged with watching my nephews one afternoon and we were equipped with books to read and age-appropriate toys to occupy us.

I remember being amazed at how many things my nephews put into their mouths. Books had all been chewed on, the extra-large Lego pieces were a favorite, but so were the various other things in the room, including a large inflatable ball. My younger nephew who was clearly teething could not of course get this in his mouth, but it was not for lack of trying.

There is something fundamentally human about what I was seeing. I was taught this later in developmental psychology courses in college. We learn a great deal as children by putting things in our mouths. Before we can make sense of what see or hear, we taste it. Of course, this can get us in trouble. We have to watch what babies put into their mouths lest it be unsafe; yet it is an important way they are learning about the world.

The psalmist gets this. Did you notice in vs 8 that he urges us to taste and see that the Lord is good? Tasting is the most primitive and fundamental of our human senses, far more trustworthy to us than sight and hearing, which are often used to deceive us. Taste it and you know for certain, then you can see the truth. This is surely why Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper for us. He knows us well. He understands our weaknesses and wants to communicate his love in the strongest terms. It is also why our Bible frequently refers to him in food imagery, including the bread of life, water of life, and more. Even a sacrificial lamb was roasted and consumed by the priest and the penitent. Read your Bible, listen to the words of forgiveness spoken by a friend or your pastor, come the Supper, hear a sermon, taste and see that the Lord is good.

Thursday of Pentecost 11 – Ephesians 4:17-5:2

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Long, long ago, in a time before cell phones, even before the widespread use of cordless phones, I served a little parish in Utah. The parsonage was across the street from the church, which meant that the boundaries between church and home were somewhat blurred. On the wall of that parsonage, in the kitchen was a telephone, affixed to the wall. It was the only phone on the main level of the house. There was a bedroom just down the hall and we installed a very long cord so I could duck into that guest room for a moment of privacy if someone called and need it. But the long cord also meant I could sort of wander around much of the kitchen and living room while on the phone.

One day, while I was talking to someone on that phone, my wife caught my eye and motioned for me to turn around and look behind me. There was my three-year old son, holding his toy phone to the side of his face, marching around the house in a pretty good imitation of his father.

Paul enjoins us to imitation of God, as beloved children imitate their loving fathers. But there is a funny thing about children. Children can also imitate bad fathers. In chapter 1 of Ephesians, Paul said that God had adopted us, given us a different inheritance, a different name and life to life. That means saying no to the other inheritance. By birth we were enslaved into a relationship with the ruler of this world and the inheritance of that enslavement is misery and death. But Christ has made us alive once more (Eph. 2:6). Now we are the children of God and have a new inheritance. Read through this passage again, slowly. Notice the descriptions which compare and contrast these two inheritances, these two lives to live. The Spirit of God empowers you to live your new inheritance today.

Friday of Pentecost 11 – John 6:35-51

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

It was a COVID-era funeral. The saint had not died of COVID, but the virus affected almost everything we did that day. We were a small group, just the family. We gathered at the graveside. Her children were uncomfortable with a gathering inside the church. The vaccines had not yet been made available. This was better than some places. One of my colleagues spoke of jumping over the cemetery fence and surreptitiously meeting with family members to share a few verses of Scripture and words of comfort at the side of their mother’s grave. In that place it was not permitted even to meet outside. We counted ourselves blessed to be there with a small group.

The weather was cool, and the wind was sharp. I wore a heavy suit jacket, the wool one which she had complimented me on the last time she had come to church a few weeks before. She noticed things like that. We gathered next to a shaft dug in the earth and the mass of a coffin which lay upon the straps which would be used to lower it into the ground. The sky was overcast and gray. We heard these words, among others, “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

Jesus speaks those words through John to us, today. Through a life of love, service, worship, marriage, parenthood, career, and more, she had partaken of that bread which came down from heaven, Jesus the Christ. He had fed her over and over. We were sad but not broken that day.

Christ's promise was made to her and to us. He is the living bread that comes down from heaven that anyone who eats of it does not die, not really. We can speak of her in the present tense still. She lives in Christ.