

**Sermon: The Food That Endures**

North Community Church, Marshfield Hills

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Based on **Psalm 51:1-12; John 6:24-35**

David is the speaker in Psalm 51, and his concern is his own personal, individual repentance. Toward other people, David could be a bit of a putz but his devotion to God was unending. Still, he knew that his renewal and sustenance could only come from God.

In the Gospel passage, Jesus is talking about ‘the bread of God’ that gives life. What kind of bread is that? And how do these two passages relate to one another?

David leads off by asking God for *mercy*. In the Bible, receiving mercy means getting what you *don't* deserve. Then, in a series of prayerful metaphors, David asks for forgiveness in order to gain that mercy.

When he asks God to *blot out* his transgressions, he sounds like someone asking a clerk to wipe out a debt on their account at a small mom-and-pop grocery store.

When he says his sin is *ever before him*, it's as if his sin is a visible burden that he can no longer ignore or keep hidden away. David's sins are deeply ingrained in him, and he speaks of them as a stain or impurity that God can *wash* or *cleanse* or *purge* from him.

Lastly, in verse 13, which the lectionary did not include for today, after his prayer, David says, “*Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you,*” acknowledging that repentance requires one to return to God and to a right path to God, whereas sin implies the opposite: a turning away from God.

David says he was born guilty, a sinner when his mother conceived him, and he says this to acknowledge both his actual sins and his inherently sinful nature. That can be a tough one for modern ears, as we are taught that we are all innocent until proven guilty.

And when David says to God, “*against you alone have I sinned,*” he knows that a crime committed against a neighbor is a crime committed against God.

In this psalm, David is aware of his sins and faces them without fear. He needs restoration and a renewed spirit, not just for salvation but for the *joy* of salvation.

With that in mind, our focus is on the Gospels and what Jesus taught us, and in trying to interpret and apply his lessons to our own lives, because the bottom line for most of us lies in our search for meaning.

In the wake of the Holocaust, for example, we learned that, for many people, the difference between life and death was sometimes based on which line they were told to stand in. Or if your village got wiped out in a tsunami, and you lived, and your neighbor died. Or if you went to war and came home but your buddy didn't. How do you make meaning for the rest of your life after experiencing something like that?

These days, there is always something to fill in the empty space within ourselves. It can be anything from obsessive shopping to some form of addiction. Some people avoid looking up at the night sky because it reminds them that we live on a miniscule dot in an infinite heaven. Meaning can be hard to come by if we have no anchor in our lives.

People wrestle with this every day, and you can't tell what others are going through just by looking at them. For many, it's the journey *to* faith that keeps them going. To be '*on the way*,' as Mark speaks of discipleship in his Gospel, sometimes *is* the way, and for some, that has to be enough.

How do today's readings help us find meaning? In the psalm, David seeks mercy and salvation. What does the crowd seek in the Gospel reading?

They seek Jesus. Everyone needs to eat, right? Every day. Just the day before, Jesus had fed this same crowd, about five thousand people in all, and now, today, their search for bread resumes. They're looking hard for Jesus, and they need to find him because he has a proven track record for being a reliable provider, however he does it.

When they catch up to him, he reminds them that they are looking for food that perishes when they ought to be looking for food that endures. Suddenly, we get the sense that Jesus is now talking above their heads.

At one point, they ask him, "What must we *do* to perform the works of God?" And when Jesus gives them a non-answer, they say they want a sign, and then ask him, "What work are *you* performing?" You would think the answer was obvious.

But they know about how their ancestors ate manna in the desert, and if they know that, then they also must know that manna was a perishable daily bread, provided by God.

Then Jesus tells them about the bread of God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. The crowd realizes that *that's* the bread they really want, and they respectfully ask Jesus to give them *this* bread always.

And then he said, "I am the bread of life."

Did Jesus mean he was literally the bread (and the wine), as some Christian traditions believe when they come to the Lord's Table? Or was he speaking metaphorically about something else entirely, as he so often did?

This is where the Gospel reading intersects with David's psalm.

Several hundred years after Jesus, as the church grew, it had become less like the church and more like the world. At the same time, Christians were persecuted for being Christians. After Constantine legalized the new religion, church power came to be centered in Rome, Alexandria, in what the Romans came to call Palestine, and later, in Constantinople. Historically speaking, it was a messy time, and from it came many different perspectives on who Jesus was in relation to God. In 325 and for the next hundred years or so, multiple councils were called to settle various heresies and to define what was hoped to be the one true definition of Jesus.

The first attempt is now called the Nicene Creed. Here is an extract from the most popular version:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God...  
Through him all things were made.  
*For us and for our salvation*  
*he came down from heaven...*

Earlier, we heard how the bread of God came down from heaven and gave life to the world. Now in this Creed, we hear that Jesus came down from heaven for *our salvation*. When Jesus said that 'the food that endures for eternal life' will be given by the Son of Man and that he himself was the bread of life, metaphorically, he was talking about salvation, the same salvation that David was looking for.

Biblically speaking, receiving justice means getting what you deserve – so be careful what you wish for. When David asks for mercy, he knows he's not worthy and so is relying on God's steadfast love and forgiveness. The fact that he is asking for mercy and promising repentance in return goes a long way for salvation.

Years ago, a theology professor named Elsa Tamez wrote that “Life without bread has no meaning;” bread is basic and essential. But to have meaning, she wrote, “our lives must include the experience of something beyond the satisfaction of basic needs. It is equally certain that the bread of life, or our hope [for salvation] in the fullness of God's kingdom, is also a basic human need as it gives meaning to our existence.”<sup>1</sup>

Soon, we will gather around the Lord’s Table to join in fellowship and forgiveness with each other and with Jesus. It’s an open, inclusive table, loaded with meaning and possibility.

David’s prayer in Psalm 51 teaches that the moment in which we know ourselves to be forgiven represents a new beginning, not an end. We owe that new beginning to God, to whom all praise belongs, and from whom comes the joy of our salvation.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Bread of Life*, International Review of Mission, 71 no 284, October 1982, p 505-509.