

By now, we get it: It's about bread. Three weeks ago, Jesus broke two loaves to satisfy five thousand people. Two weeks ago, Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life." Last week, Jesus got in trouble for saying God sent him as bread from heaven.

Perhaps it's getting redundant. Maybe a bit repetitive. We get it. Jesus. God. Bread.

If we've been paying close attention, we realize that it's also about more than bread. This bread gives **life** to the world. This bread endures for eternity. This bread is a sign from God so that we might **believe** in the One whom God has sent. This bread is about *more than bread*.

Jesus really drives that message home this week when we hear him say, "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my **flesh** Those who **eat my flesh** and **drink my blood** have eternal life." His mention of flesh is scandalously carnal. He's trying to get his audience's—and our—attention. Make sure we're listening. Make sure we're thinking. Make sure we know it's about more than bread.

By saying "the bread that I give is my flesh," Jesus is putting some skin in the game, or rather, some skin on God. The word "flesh" recalls the first chapter of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became **flesh** and lived among us." *That the bread is flesh* means not only that God is distant and cosmic but also God is intimate and enfleshed; not only that God was before in the beginning but also

that God is eternal, and here and now. God is the bread that feeds thousands, yes, and God is also flesh: flesh that touches the tainted skin of lepers, a body that anoints bodies riddled with demons, skin and bones that shares the company of sinners. The flesh of the Lamb of God, which when flayed on the cross, takes away the sin of the world.

It's about bread, and it's about so much more. It's about flesh and the Word of God dwelling among us. It's about believing that Jesus, the Lamb of God, takes away the sin of the world. Believing, as Luther preached in a sermon on this text, "that his flesh was given for me and His blood was shed for me and that he overcame sin, death, the devil, hell and all (other) evil for me." And it's about abiding, "[b]ecause to eat this flesh and drink this blood means to become incorporated into Christ by faith and to take part in his suffering."¹ It's about taking Christ into our hearts by faith and letting Christ change us from the inside out.

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Right now, there are loaves of bread sitting in our church's kitchen, ready to become sandwiches for the guests at CARITAS this week. CARITAS stands for Congregations Around Richmond To Assure Shelter and its mission is to "help our most vulnerable neighbors break the cycles of homelessness and addiction to reclaim their dignity." One of their programs is a roving homeless shelter, in which small groups of men, women, or families spend a week

¹ From "Notes on Luther's Interpretation of John 6:47-58" by John Theodore Mueller. Accessed online at <http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/MuellerNotesonLuthersInterpretation.pdf>.

sleeping in a church facility. While guests at a church, they get fed. That's where our bread comes in. Starting tonight, we're making bag lunches every night this week for the group of homeless women sleeping at St. Luke's UMC. On the outside, this ministry is about bread: making sandwiches, packing lunches, feeding the homeless.

But our gospel—our Good News this week—reminds us that it's also—and must be—about more than bread. Because following Jesus, eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Lamb of God, believing in the Word of God, abiding in Christ and Christ abiding in us, sharing in Christ's sufferings, means that discipleship doesn't stop with bread.

When we follow Jesus, making sandwiches becomes about more than simply feeding the homeless. It also becomes about getting to know who they are. Why they're homeless in the first place. What keeps them from finding or maintaining a home. Asking why, in one of the most abundant counties in Virginia, so many live in perpetual scarcity.

Following the Bread of Life, the Word Made Flesh, is about feeding hungry people and also about listening to those who suffer, bringing the stories of the powerless to those in power, advocating for those whose voices typically fall on closed ears. Following Jesus, the Bread of Life, the Word Made Flesh, is about sharing our bread and using our flesh to know and to plead for those who struggle for daily bread.

In a phrase, it's about more than bread.

At LCOS, we're really good a bread. We are giving and generous and gracious people, people who love people we don't even know. The loaves, cookies, water bottles, fruit, and more in the kitchen; the casseroles each second Wednesday for Richmond Friends of the Homeless, the produce we bring on God's Work Our Hands Sunday, show that.

And if we want to grow in faith, if we want to dive into the abundance of God, if we want to follow Jesus more closely, then our outreach becomes about more than bread.

It becomes about hosting and getting to know the homeless, asking for their names and stories, learning about how they live, to use CARITAS's phrase, reclaiming their dignity first in our own minds. In becoming more than bread, our outreach seeks to become aware of public policies and to promote communal practices that help ensure food and housing for the suffering. In becoming more than bread, our lives of service move from more than just satisfying hunger to the more radical actions of forgiving someone when they don't "deserve it"; of showing a stranger unmerited grace and love; of building and maintaining *real relationships* with those unlike you, whom you disagree with.

For Jesus gives us bread not only so that we and others may eat but also so that the life of the world may be transformed. God came among us in the flesh and offered that flesh on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. So, set free from the power of sin and death and free from bondage of having to earn

eternal life, we can use our flesh—all of it—to bring that abundant life for the world.

So, let's not leave John 6 thinking only about bread, and let's not make sandwiches thinking only about lunch. Let's consider how it's about more than bread. Let's allow this bread and blood from the table, the flesh of the Lamb of God, to free us and fuel us to use our flesh for the lives of others and collective life of the world.

AMEN.