

## Powerful Bread

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, August 23, 2009)

1 Kings 19:4-8 (TEV) <sup>4</sup>Elijah walked a whole day into the wilderness. He stopped and sat down in the shade of a tree and wished he would die. “It’s too much, LORD,” he prayed. “Take away my life; I might as well be dead!” <sup>5</sup>He lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, “Wake up and eat.” <sup>6</sup>He looked around and saw a loaf of bread and a jar of water near his head. He ate and drank, and lay down again. <sup>7</sup>The LORD’s angel returned and woke him up a second time, saying, “Get up and eat, or the trip will be too much for you.” <sup>8</sup>Elijah got up, ate and drank, and the food gave him enough strength to walk forty days to Sinai, the holy mountain.

John 6:35, 41-51 (TEV) <sup>35</sup>“I am the bread of life,” Jesus told them. “Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be thirsty. <sup>41</sup>The people started grumbling about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” <sup>42</sup>So they said, “This man is Jesus son of Joseph, isn’t he? We know his father and mother. How, then, does he now say he came down from heaven?”

<sup>43</sup>Jesus answered, “Stop grumbling among yourselves. <sup>44</sup>People cannot come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me; and I will raise them to life on the last day. <sup>45</sup>The prophets wrote, ‘Everyone will be taught by God.’ Anyone who hears the Father and learns from him comes to me. <sup>46</sup>This does not mean that anyone has seen the Father; he who is from God is the only one who has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup>I am telling you the truth: he who believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup>I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup>Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, but they died. <sup>50</sup>But the bread that comes down from heaven is of such a kind that whoever eats it will not die. <sup>51</sup>I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If you eat this bread, you will live forever. The bread that I will give you is my flesh, which I give so that the world may live.”

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 (TEV) <sup>25</sup>No more lying, then! Each of you must tell the truth to the other believer, because we are all members together in the body of Christ. <sup>26</sup>If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day. <sup>27</sup>Don’t give the Devil a chance. <sup>28</sup>If you used to rob, you must stop robbing and start working, in order to earn an honest living for yourself and to be able to help the poor. <sup>29</sup>Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you. <sup>30</sup>And do not make God’s Holy Spirit sad; for the Spirit is God’s mark of ownership on you, a guarantee that the Day will come when God will set you free. <sup>31</sup>Get rid of all bitterness, passion, and anger. No more shouting or insults, no more hateful feelings of any sort. <sup>32</sup>Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ. <sup>1</sup>Since you are God’s dear children, you must try to be like him. <sup>2</sup>Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us and gave his life for us as a sweet-smelling offering and sacrifice that pleases God.

1 Kings 16, verse 30, says that King Ahab of Israel “...sinned against the Lord more than any of his predecessors.” That pretty well says it all. In the verses that followed, we are told that one of the worst things Ahab did was to marry Jezebel, whose very name even today is synonymous with wickedness. Jezebel came from a people who worshiped a false god called “Baal.” Under Jezebel’s influence, King Ahab turned away from God, worshipped Baal and built idols and altars to Baal all over Israel. The prophet Elijah was one prophet in Israel who remained faithful to God, and he spoke clearly and plainly to King Ahab, and the people of Israel, that they should return to God and worship only God. It eventually came down to a competition that you can read about in chapter 18. The priests of Baal took a bull and sacrificed it, laid it on a pile of wood that they might burn their sacrifice, and then prayed to Baal all day long to send fire to consume their sacrifice. Of course, nothing happened. Then Elijah prepared his bull for sacrifice, laid it on a pile of wood, and had four jars filled with water, which were poured over it all. A Sunday School teacher was teaching a group of small children this story, and when she came to this part she asked the children, “Why do you think Elijah poured water over his sacrifice?” One little one answered, “To make the gravy.” Well, in chapter 18 we read that God sent fire, whether lightening or what, we do not know, and Elijah’s sacrifice was burned, completely consumed, and even the water they had poured on it didn’t have a chance to become gravy. The people of Israel who saw this miracle were convinced that God was the only true God, and that the prophets of Baal were all liars and frauds. So they rose up and killed all of those false prophets, which had been brought into Israel by Jezebel.

Now Jezebel wasn't too pleased about this, and she set out to capture and kill Elijah, within 24 hours. This is where our lesson begins. Elijah was so frightened and discouraged that he just wanted to die. He was so tired of running from Ahab and Jezebel and all the wickedness of Israel, he just wanted to give up. And so he prayed to God that he might die, right there under the tree where he went to lay down. But God had different plans for Elijah. God provided Elijah with bread, powerful bread, bread from heaven, we might say, and Elijah was given strength to do something he never dreamt he could do.

God offers us all bread, bread that can strengthen us to do something we never dreamt we could do. But we don't recognize it. What did you see the last time the elders passed the communion bread? Plain white bread? Haven't you seen this before? Wasn't it all very familiar to you?

That is just like the Jews treated Jesus, in our Gospel lesson. They knew who Jesus was – they knew his Mom and Dad. How could this same Jesus be anybody special, they were saying. And they missed everything. They missed God's grace, God's forgiveness, they missed the gift of the Holy Spirit; they missed the gift of salvation.

And please don't think that the gift of salvation is only for the next life. It is a gift that begins now, that changes things now. The new life in Christ, God's gift to us, begins in this life. Paul is teaching the Ephesians, in our lesson for this morning, about some of the attributes of this new life. There is so much in this lesson: Speak the truth to our neighbors. Control your anger. Do not steal but do honest work. Give up bitterness, passion and anger, and be kind to one another, be tenderhearted, forgive as freely as God has forgiven you.

We need to be careful as we try to put on these attributes of the new life, so that we understand what Paul is teaching us. For example, truth can be brutal. We use the expression, "sometimes the truth hurts." I don't think that is the kind of truth Paul had in mind. Sure, Paul writes, "tell the truth to the other believers because we are all members in the body of Christ." But in verse 29 he writes, "Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you." It isn't always as important to know you are right, as it is to keep lines of communication open, to keep dialog going. An old adage says, "The mark of a true gentleman is one who knows he is right, but doesn't have to say it." Yes, we must put away falsehood, avoid telling lies, but truth must be spoken in love, it must build up, it must give grace to those who hear.

In verse 26 Paul tries to teach us about how to handle our anger. Now there is a challenging topic. We have a lot of rage in our society today, and it is almost like rage has become an excuse for bad behavior.

Paul spells out a lot of things that should be our rules for this new life in Christ. Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. And really, the bottom line is, be imitators of Christ, live in love.

Oh, wow, I can't do that – seriously, can you? I can't imitate Christ any more than I could go for 40 days without eating. Oh, but that is exactly what Elijah did, after he ate the bread provided by God. God is still providing bread. Didn't you have some during our last communion service? That wasn't just ordinary bread, regardless of how familiar it may have seemed to you. That bread can provide extraordinary power, transforming power. That powerful bread can give you new life, that bread is not just for your future life, but it is for today, and this week, for the next 40 days, and even longer. May the bread of life strengthen you to run the race of faith, to live the new life in Christ, and to be imitators of Christ. Amen.