

One . . . the banana I had this morning for breakfast.

Two . . . the coffee that's keeping me awake for this sermon.

Three . . . yesterday's all-you-can-eat Brazilian buffet that our brother Martin so graciously prepared.

Four . . . well, you get the picture.

I could keep this up for hours. There's no end to how God's answered my prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." You see, every meal, every drink, every snack, everything that's ever filled our tummies comes straight from our Lord's hand.

A few years ago, a group of seminary students from Duke Divinity School spent a week at a Trappist monastery. At one of their evening meals, as a student was enjoying their wonderful, delicious bread in silence, they blurted out, "Hey, did we make this bread . . . or did somebody give it to us?" One of the monks answered . . . "Yes."

We might get our groceries at Publix—y'know, request a special cut from their butcher, squeak past an employee stocking the shelves, and pay the cashier before exiting—but there's no question that it's not from them that we get our daily bread. Even the farmers behind the scenes—working the fields, raising the livestock, harvesting the orchards—they aren't the true source of our food either. After all, none of them ever invented the seeds that they're planting nor came up with the animals that they're breeding. No, God's the one who's not only created all things, but also sustains all things—He gets all the credit. We're reminded of this fact whenever there's a drought that sets in or a disease that sweeps through or any setback causing a food shortage. It's easy to forget God's provision when we're so far removed from being an agrarian society—but that's the way most peoples have ever lived. For them, it's plain to see that they're not in charge of the sun, or the rain, or the good soil. Rather, there's something or someone beyond themselves responsible for each ingredient in the recipe for a good harvest. But we've lost that—you and I mostly go about our business, working for the almighty dollar, all the while thinking that we're somehow responsible for what we have on our plate.

Funny how statistics show that populations around the world who have far less than we do—less food, less wardrobe, less house, fewer vacations and massages and golf outings, even little access to health care—those populations are by and large happier people than we are. Now, why is that? Part of it could be that they don't have to deal with many of the stresses we face in our modern culture. Or part of it could be that after putting in a hard day's work, they take the time to just rest and relax every day, to proverbially stop and smell the roses. Or part of it could be that their work is more satisfying, that is, they can see immediate results—whereas for those of us who stare at a screen all day, or manage people, or push papers around a desk, the fruit of our labors is harder to find. But, most of all, I wonder if it has to do with an awareness of divine activity in their lives. Many of them know that there's some kind of a higher being responsible for what's on their table. And that kind of care from beyond actually draws them closer to their god.

In her book, *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are*, Ann Voskamp points out the benefits of counting your blessings. In fact, she suggests that the secret to true, lasting joy is saying *Thank You*. The reason so many of us are unsatisfied with our lives is because American consumerism has so blinded us that all we can see is what we *don't* have. Everything's about keeping up with the Joneses—the Porsche parked in our neighbor's driveway, the beach house our co-worker won't shut up about, the latest gadgets it seems like everyone else has but us—and we get jealous. But the dare that Voskamp gives the reader in her book is to write down every gift, every little thing that enters into our lives during each day. Of course, when we do that, it's not long before we find that there's not enough time in the day nor pages in our notebooks to list everything—and that's the point.

See, God is so gracious and so generous that He gives us more than we could ever notice. But the more we do take note of, the fuller our lives feel, and the deeper our bond with the Lord grows. Just think, if everything is a gift from God, then there's not a single thing that isn't your heavenly Father's way of saying *I love you*. Polls show that one of the biggest

yearnings for American Christians is that they want to feel closer to God, sense His presence in their everyday lives—could this be the secret? When we get right down to it, with every minute we have left, every heartbeat, each breath, God’s gifts just keep coming. If we could see the regular, ordinary things we take for granted for what they really are—presents from our Lord—would that also change the way we see His presence in our lives?

By faith, we’d wake up every day like it was Christmas morning—finding a mountain of presents under our tree just waiting to be unwrapped. As Luther points out in his Small Catechism, God’s daily bread for us is far more than just food but includes “everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as . . . clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.” It’s like the book of James says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (1:17). Imagine the joy we’re robbing ourselves of by not recognizing that every good thing in our lives is from none other than God Himself, like a Father lovingly providing for His children.

So, as we’re counting our blessings, tallying up every gift—kajillion four hundred and thirty-six . . . kajillion four hundred and thirty-seven . . . kajillion four hundred and thirty-eight . . .—let’s not forget one particular present that’s better than all the others combined! Before we get too caught up in the things of this life, Jesus directs us to the greatest gift ever given. See, as awesome as God’s provision is for us here on planet earth, there’s more—wa-a-a-ay more! That’s what today’s Gospel in John chapter 6 is all about. At the beginning of that chapter, there’s a crowd, just like us. They just witnessed the miraculous Feeding of the Five Thousand much like our eyes have been opened to the everyday miracles God performs for us. And also like they hunted Jesus down to make Him their bread king, we also find ourselves asking Him for more of our “daily bread” as if that’s all that’s important. But like He told them, Jesus now tells us, “Do not work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

When it comes to this Fourth Petition, “Give us this day our daily bread,” we come to find out that, in addition to all of our physical needs, we really ought to be more concerned about our spiritual ones. That’s because one day for all of us our time will be up—our health will give out, our heart will stop, we won’t be breathing anymore—and no amount of daily bread will do us any good. And even more, when that time comes, we’ll be face to face with the Lord—having to answer for why we were so blind to His gifts, why we were so ungrateful for them, even why we did such a poor job of handling them. Knowing that could happen any moment, I think you and I agree that we need something else, something more than just the daily bread we’re so used to looking for this side of heaven.

In today’s reading, to the crowd who sees Him as nothing but a meal-ticket, Jesus says, “Sure, your fathers in the wilderness ate manna from heaven, but they all still died. What you guys really need is a bread that’ll keep you alive forever.” After all, you’ll remember, “man doesn’t live by bread alone”. And in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges us not to worry about what we will eat or what we will wear, because God our Father already knows those needs and takes care of them. No, whether we realize it or not, we have souls that hunger and thirst for righteousness, like a deer pants for streams of water so do we pant for the Lord. So, where do we get such bread? What is this daily bread that not only feeds our bodies every day but also feeds our souls for eternity?

Jesus tells us that “the bread that [He] gives for the life of the world is [His] flesh.” It was in the little town of Bethlehem that God reaching down placed in a basket our daily bread. Maybe that’s why in Hebrew the word Bethlehem means “House of Bread”. There in manger, a feeding trough, the Living Bread came down from heaven and was made ours. He was given to us, to be baked on the cross in God’s fiery wrath for our joylessness and ingratitude. But like bread that rises in the oven so did Jesus rise again from the grave for our salvation. And here now on this altar that bread comes down from heaven again. It’s not like the bread the fathers ate and died—but whoever eats this Bread, “whoever feeds on [His] flesh and drinks [His] blood,” Jesus promises, “will live forever!”

No wonder the Roman Catholic Church has a special word that they use for the last Eucharist a person receives on their deathbed—Viaticum. Viaticum is Latin and it means “food for the journey.” I’ve always loved that—it reminds us that every day God provides us with manna in the wilderness of our lives, but when it comes to the last treacherous leg of our journey—the valley of the shadow of death—He provides for that too, Viaticum. As we get ready to enter the

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Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer

John 6:51-59

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Promised Land we have bread for the journey, food for our immortal souls—the life-giving body and blood of our Savior Jesus Christ. We have the daily bread we need in this life, yes . . . but also for the life to come.

It won't be long before we pray one more time, "Give us this day our daily bread." And in less time than it takes to say *Holy Communion*, God will again respond, "Done!"