A couple of years ago, I had a meal that was so special, I took a picture of it. That picture is now hanging on my kitchen wall so I can savor the memory every day. This meal took place in Spain, in a small village in the hills overlooking the Mediterranean sea. I went there for lunch with my mother and several of her friends and we sat outside on a brick patio that was shaded by ornamental orange trees. We all ordered tapas – small plates of food served on a larger platter. Mine was mouth-watering: a Middle-Eastern spring roll on a bed of cous cous, small balls of fried goat cheese on lettuce, cubed potatoes topped with incredible Manchego cheese, a piece of fresh, crusty bread and a glass of white wine. Even without the picture, there is no way I would ever forget that day or that meal. The setting, the people and the food all combined to create one of the most memorable meals of my lifetime.

The people in our gospel story had a meal they wouldn't soon forget. They would end up telling their grandchildren about the day they followed Jesus up a mountain to listen to him speak. Lots of people came that day and by the time they had all gathered, there were about 5000 of them on that mountain. None of them had thought to pack a lunch and they were beginning to get hungry. Andrew, one of the disciples, found a young boy who showed up with five loaves of bread and two fish. These loaves were likely pretty small; same with the fish which would have had to fit in the boy's pockets or a small bag. It would have been enough for the boy and maybe one other person. We all know how the story goes: Jesus took the loaves of bread and the two fish and distributed them among all the people on the hillside. The food itself was not what made the meal so special; it was the kind of fare they ate every day. This is the part they got excited about and would tell over and over as long as they lived: not only was there enough bread and fish for everyone to eat their fill, there were leftovers – twelve baskets worth! This Jesus was amazing! A murmur began to spread among the crowd: “Let's get this guy to stay here with us. What with his miraculous powers and all, he could come in pretty handy.”

Jesus got wind of what the people wanted to do and went off by himself so they could not trap him. He and his disciples made their way across the body of water toward the town of Capernaum, but the crowds were persistent and followed them there. The people weren't going to let Jesus get away so easily. Their bellies were leading the way; they wanted more of that miracle bread with which Jesus had fed them the day before.

Of course, Jesus had performed the miracle as a sign that pointed to something larger than the feeding itself; in fact, the word miracle literally means, "sign that points to God." But the crowd didn't care about signs; they were all about what they could see and touch and taste and they wanted Jesus around for more of that. Here is where the conversation between Jesus and the crowd started to take place on different planes. Jesus spoke of food that never perishes but endures for eternity. Eternal food! What a great idea! The people asked Jesus what they had to do to get their hands on food that never ran out. Jesus invited them to believe in God. The crowd wanted to know what sign Jesus would give them so they could believe. They reminded him of the time Moses gave his people manna in the wilderness so they would not starve.

It wasn't Moses who gave their ancestors the manna, Jesus said; God did it because God was looking out for them. Not only that, God had now sent true bread from heaven, which gives life to the world. “Give us this bread always,” the crowd quickly replied. “Give us this bread always.” Their bellies were still doing the talking, of course. The people wanted Jesus on their own terms, as their own miracle worker who could get them out of jams and make sure they didn't run out of what they needed. Other than that, they could more or less take care of themselves.

If we're honest, don't we have to admit that this is how we often approach Jesus, too? We pray for help when our backs are against the wall, and Jesus answers our prayers, for he cares deeply for us. But Jesus came to be more than just a spiritual vending machine, dispensing help when we need it. As he told the people on the mountain, God gave the Israelites manna in the wilderness and Jesus gave the crowd more than their share of bread and fish to point to something larger than the miracles themselves. God provides not just for our physical hunger, God provides for our spiritual hunger as well. Jesus is the true bread from heaven, Jesus himself tells us, sent to give life to the world. Whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever believes in him will never thirst. This is good news for our souls. This is a reminder that we do not have to take care of ourselves; our whole lives, body and spirit, are in the hands of the one who created us and will see us through this life into the next.

We would probably be content with having our bellies filled on a regular basis, with a God who makes sure we have enough food, a nice place to live and resources to live a happy life. But God wants more for us than a safe and contented life with lots of the things the world cherishes all around us. God opens for us the doors of heaven to give us rich and abundant lives. Through the gift of Jesus, God fills us not only with daily bread but also with God's very spirit. When our hearts are filled with Jesus, we are moved to act in his name. We start seeing those who do not have enough food for themselves and their families and we share our food with them. We start picking up on stories of those who are treated unfairly in this world and we are moved to share their pain. We see this world inundated with fighting and war and we yearn to be agents of peace – in our homes, in our schools and in our communities. We begin to pray not only for ourselves but for those who need Jesus' liberating love in their lives, then we pray even harder for a way to be vessels of that love.

When you and I ask God for a sign that God is with us, we secretly hope God will shower us with worldly goods. We ask for a sign and God sends us Jesus, manna for the world. Jesus invites us to a table where he feeds us with himself: the bread that is his body, the wine that is his blood, the meal of angels for our mortal bodies and souls. When is the last time you came to that table totally empty, asking Jesus to fill you with his love, with his holy agenda for your life? What might it mean to let go of what you hold onto so tightly, to hold out your hands and ask Jesus to make your life a gift to him and to others? How might your life and mine be changed if we stretched out our empty hands and said, “Sir, give us this bread always”?

Today, after worship, we look forward to a delicious meal that will satisfy our hungry bellies. Breaking bread together is a great part of our life together as God's people. But first, let us approach the table of Christ, hungry and thirsty for what he serves there.

Singer/songwriter Amanda Opelt, says it this way in her song, “Hungry/Communion”:

*Come awake, come awake oh flesh and bone.*

*You are more than a body and more than what you know.*

*Come awake, come awake oh spirit come.*

*You are dust when you started and dust when you are done.*

*And if you don't come hungry, don't come at all, don't come at all,*

*and if you don't come thirsty, don't come at all, don't come at all.*

Amen.

*Pentecost 10B*

*August 2, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Church*

*John 6: 24-35*