### “The Bread of God” Steve Finlan for The First Church, August 4, 2024

**Ephesians 4:11–16**

11The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. . . 15Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament . . . as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

**John 6:27–35**

27 Jesus said “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” 28 Then they said to him . . . 31“Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” 32Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

We’ve been reading passages from Ephesians for several weeks now, and will continue onward. Ephesus is a city on Turkey’s west coast; it was a Greek city in those days. The letter is either written by Paul, or by someone in Paul’s circle, or by someone in Paul’s circle who made use of some of Paul’s actual words (the most likely prospect). Today’s reading has a very interesting reference to spiritual maturity, speaking of “all of us com[ing] to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13). So we actually grow up *in* Christ, like limbs of a healthy body, knit together and working properly, as he goes on to say (4:16). You could think of growing up in Christ as growing up in a living suit that expands as you grow in love and understanding.

We also should be able to think of Christ himself, growing up into spiritual maturity, passing through each of the stages of life that *we* pass through, and *perfecting* each stage of living as he goes. *We* can’t expect to be perfect, but we can work on perfect*ING* ourselves to the degree possible.

We can aspire to grow up into the measure of the full stature of Christ, if we study and learn more of truth, and then focus our practice of goodness, and open up and perceive more of spiritual beauty. Our study guide in learning how to do this is the life of Jesus. He wrote the real Book of Love, the love of the Father for his family.

Jesus describes himself and his life thus: “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33). That was Jesus’ mission: to give life and truth and spiritual nurture first of all to his disciples, but then to the whole world. The Spirit of Truth is a worldwide influence, alive today, trying to teach us that we are all spiritual brothers and sisters.

Jesus came *from* heaven *to* earth, from the spiritual level to the material level. While here, he felt the whole range of human emotions: sorrow, pain, sadness for the behavior of his relatives, elation at witnessing expressions of faith, love for his friends, and seriousness about his life mission. He had human emotions, disappointments, successes, laughter, love, and death. He came to reveal the truth, and to give life to the world. He *shares* our life; he *gives* us life, and he feeds us spiritually.

Bread nurtures us. *Spiritual* kinds of bread, that is, truth and love and Jesus’ personality, nurture us spiritually. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry” (John 6:35). This spiritual nourishment is always available to us. Whenever we ask, we will receive.

If we are filled with this spiritual bread, then we can live our lives with renewed energy. We can “grow up in every way into him who is the head” (Eph 4:15). It’s a picture we can hold in our minds: growing up *in* Jesus, even if we don’t fully know exactly how that works. Probably it means two *main* things: that he oversees our growth, and that we are growing to resemble him in spirit. We get a few more supporting clues: that maturity involves “knowledge of the Son of God,” that it involves unity with other believers, and that it means speaking the truth, so that we are knit together in a healthy way (4:13, 15–16). It might mean others things, too, but isn’t that enough? Isn’t it amazing enough to grow to become Jesus-like in your character? It’s nice to have a concept of what the result of our growth will be. Part of it is that the community grows into a well-functioning body.

And that leads us to the Eucharist, which we celebrate today. There are several interpretations of what the Eucharist means. One comes from the earliest known liturgy, the first-century document called the Didache that I use as part of our ceremony. It has the bread standing for the world-wide church, gathered from many hills into one, while the wine symbolizes the vine of David, that is, the line of descent that culminates in the Messiah. Another interpretation is that the bread represents his body, handed over to be killed. Another sees the bread representing his life, his *whole* life that he shared with us, and the wine representing the Spirit, also shared with all of us. In the parable of the wineskins new wine represents Jesus’ new teaching. This incarnational interpretation is one that I like; it puts the emphasis on Jesus’ *whole* life, and on the Spirit that comes afterward. We are united in our knowledge of Jesus’ life and our acceptance of Jesus’ Spirit.

Again, knowledge of the Son of God plays a role, as it does in the Ephesians passage. I think this includes knowledge of his life and recognition of his style, his points of emphasis, and his contrasts with the religious people of his day. Pomp and circumstance, fancy robes and smells, were not a part of his style. Sincerity, kindness, generosity, focused piety, and honesty were qualities that he admired and that he embodied. We will take on these qualities as we grow up into his stature.

My exhortation to you today is simple: keep growing Godward. Take on these godly qualities. Seek to be knit together well with the family of God, in unity and peace. Learn about his life, and accept his Spirit, and the guidance it brings. And so, throughout your life, go with God.