

Every day, the Christian Church around the world prays to our Father, “And give us this day our daily bread.” What does this mean? As Lutherans, we’re blessed to have that explained in our Catechism: “God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people, but we pray in this petition that God would lead us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.”

Now of course, Luther didn’t just pull that explanation from thin air. He used examples throughout Scripture that show God providing daily bread for people. One such example is our Gospel lesson today. As we follow the dialog and interaction between Jesus and Philip, Andrew, and the crowds, we see the love of God at work, and know that that love is there for us still today.

So again, this text features three interactions between Jesus and others, and each interaction shows us something about our Lord giving daily bread. First up: the apostle Philip. As Jesus teaches and a large crowd gathers around Him, the Lord turns to Philip and says, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”

Jesus cares for the crowd and wants to take care of them. So He puts this question to Philip. And the disciple, no doubt taken aback, replies, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” It’s impossible! So why would Jesus ask Philip an impossible question?

Well, consider what the evangelist St. John provides right after that question as a bit of divinely-inspired commentary: “He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.” Note that the issue, the problem, isn’t actually the crowds and how they’ll be cared for. Jesus already knows what He is going to do. No, this is to test Philip, to put his faith under pressure and through that strengthen it.

There’s a first lesson for us – when problems arise in life and we face great challenges, the challenge itself isn’t ultimately the main issue. God already knows how He will resolve the problem, how He will provide for His people. And, as Luther says in the Catechism, the Lord’s going to do it because He’s a good and loving God, even toward people who are evil. No, the Lord puts us to the test like He did Philip in order to strengthen our faith in Him.

Let’s consider the question put to Philip a little closer to see what else our Lord would teach us. Note that Jesus doesn’t ask “How will we feed all these people?” That would probably be our natural way of thinking. We’re looking for “how,” for the means, the ability to provide for a need. Can it be done, or is it impossible?

But with Jesus, with God, all things are possible. “How” is rarely ever the right question. Instead, Jesus asks, “Where?” What will be the source? From where will the care, the fulfillment of the need come? Where will you look to for help, for daily bread?

Jesus' question also highlights the common source of where we as sinful men often look in times of need. He asks, "Where are we to buy bread?" It's subtle, one little word: "buy." Our first reflex in many problems, in many times of need, is to assume that money can fix the problem, if we just have enough of it. And to be sure, God grants people the use of money in their lives. Money itself isn't evil.

But this goes back to words Jesus would speak several times in ministry, including in the Sermon on the Mount: "You cannot serve God and money." Jesus is subtly putting before Philip the question of, "Will you look to money to be the source, the 'where,' of the solutions to your problems, or will you trust in God as the source, the one from whom comes every good and perfect gift?"

Philip, for his part, recognizes the impossibility of money as the solution here. The problem is, though, if money can't work, Philip's got no other solution. This interaction has a remarkable parallel with the rich young man who comes to Jesus, but who refuses to give up his riches to follow Jesus. After the man goes away sad, Jesus says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" How do the disciples respond? "Then who can be saved?" They essentially ask, "If money can't do it, what can?!"

Jesus answers them – and us – with the words, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." This is perhaps the summary of what we learn from this interaction with Philip. We pray for daily bread, because only with God is it certain. Money, and all the other things of this world, can and do fail. Nothing is guaranteed in this world. But with God, all things are possible. Our Father will never fail to care for us.

After Philip, the apostle Andrew speaks up. He says to Jesus, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" Here the test shifts a bit. Andrew is on the right track, but falls short of the full answer.

He has found the means, the thing that Jesus will use to feed the crowd. And note, that thing – a boy's lunch – isn't there through the efforts of the disciples. No, it is purely God's providence that a young boy is there who is willing to share his lunch. Now, Andrew doesn't dismiss this boy or his meager offering. His faith is nudging him in the right direction. He recognizes that something is here, hence his bringing the boy to Jesus. But his faith isn't strong enough to make the jump clear to, "You can use this, Jesus, for with you all things are possible!"

This is a temptation we Christians face often in our lives as well. We pray to the Lord with our worries and needs, believing that He loves us and is able to care for us. But then when the answer comes, we might look at it and think, "Really? Is this all, Lord? I'm not sure this is quite enough for the problem I'm facing." Perhaps this is in our lives, where we look at our income or retirement and then at the expenses and needs before us and think, "I'm not sure this is enough, Lord."

Or maybe we have a need, and our Lord points out to us that, really, we could make do with what we already have, but our flesh wants to get something new and shiny to solve the problem instead. The sin of covetousness has its roots in this perception that what God has given isn't actually enough and we need more.

Another place this problem of Andrew comes up is in the Church. Throughout its history, the Church has always found itself facing problems, needs, even attacks. Spreading to other lands, facing hostile peoples, having her members tempted by indifference and apathy and the pleasures of this world – there is nothing new under the sun, as the Scriptures say.

To face these challenges, and to spread salvation abroad to every nation and people, what has the Lord supplied to His bride? The Word and the Sacraments. From a human perspective, these look even more inadequate than five loaves and two fish. We're tempted to think, "How will proclaiming this Word, which by its own admission doesn't always make sense to human reason, change hearts and minds?" Or, "How can we be sure that Baptism actually does something? When we baptize babies, they can't tell us what's happened, and often when adults are baptized, they don't feel any big difference." Or, "How can God make His actual flesh and actual blood manifest among us? And why doesn't it look, taste, or smell like anything has happened? And isn't that cannibalism and kind of gross?" (As an aside, that's the issue that will cause many of Jesus' disciples to quit following Him later on in this chapter of John.)

We look at these Means of Grace and think that they're woefully insufficient, that they need our improvement if the Church is to stand a chance. So we better leave out those parts of the Word that offend people, otherwise they'll leave and then we won't have money (there's that idol again!) to keep the Church afloat. Or we better not emphasize Baptism so much, so that we can get along with all the other denominations who don't believe God saves through it. Or we better soften our Communion policy and avoid the Bible passages about "eating and drinking judgment on oneself," again, so we don't offend anyone.

But what does Jesus do? He doesn't answer Andrew's question. He just says, "Have the people sit down." He knows what He's going to do. He's provided the means to do what needs to be done. With Him, nothing is impossible. He takes the loaves, and gives thanks. And having given thanks, He distributes the loaves among all the people, and the fish as well. What's the result? Everyone eats his fill, and there is more – much more – left over than what they even started with!

That's how our Lord works still. He doesn't provide exhaustive explanations for how He's going to work. Our minds probably couldn't grasp it anyway! Instead, He just calls us to trust in Him and in what He has given to us, to give thanks in all circumstances, and leave the "how" to Him. And what happens when we do this?

Consider your own lives. I'm sure you've had hard times, times of great need and uncertainty in your lives. And yet, God has brought you to this point. He will not fail to sustain you and care for you, both in this life and then, when He knows the time is right, in the life to come.

Likewise, He will never fail to care for His Church on earth. He will never stop working through the Word and the Sacraments to bring people into His household and sustain them there. Will there be hard times? Yes. Is it possible for people to harden their hearts against the Word and drive it away? Yes – both for individuals and for whole nations.

But often, when the Church encounters trials, the Lord uses them to grow the Church. God uses hard times to strip away all the idols and human inventions and cause people to cling again to those means that He has given. And where the Church trusts in the Lord and in those simple means, she always has more than enough.

After Philip and Andrew, we now come to Jesus' interaction with the crowd. By His divine power, Jesus has miraculously fed them. And not just a little bit to tide them over until they get home. No, everyone eats as much as he desires, and then there are twelve baskets left over.

When the people see this sign and realize just what has happened, they, like Andrew, start off down the right path. They exclaim, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" And they're right! Jesus is in fact the prophet foretold by Moses, one of the many roles of the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament.

Yet right after they make this correct observation, their sinful flesh takes over and steers them in a wrong direction. Rather than see Jesus as the God who grants daily bread and worship Him accordingly, they see the power of God at work and think, "How can we use this for our own advantage?" The crowds seek to make Jesus their king by force, which means they want Him to be their puppet. They want Him to use His power for their earthly benefit, to bring them comfort and riches and prestige.

And this isn't a one-off desire unique to this crowd. In that period in Jewish history, it was a very common belief that the Messiah would be an earthly ruler who would reestablish Jewish independence and restore the glory of the Old Testament Davidic kingdom.

This temptation is similar to how we are tempted in our own day. We're tempted to think that, because we're Christians, our lives should be easier. "I'm being faithful to God; why do I still have this or that problem in my life?" The temptation gets even more tempting when we see those who don't believe in Christ, who don't lead Christian lives, having things go really well in this life.

Our sinful side questions God, asking Him, "If you're not going to rule as king how I think you should rule, then I'm not sure if I really believe you are the King." Like the crowds next to the Sea of Galilee, we too are often guilty of not simply bowing down at the feet of the King and humbly submitting ourselves to His Word, trusting that He will do whatever is best for us.

The irony here is that, again, Jesus is a king, even the King of Kings. The crowd wants to put Jesus on the throne of some piddly kingdom in Jerusalem, but Jesus came from the throne of heaven itself, ruling and reigning over all things. And further, He is the King who has come to use His divine power for the benefit of the people. But that benefit isn't a worldly freedom from the Romans, it's spiritual freedom from the power of sin.

At the right time, He will allow Himself to be taken by force, though it will be a mob led by the traitor Judas. He will declare Himself to be the Coming One, the Son of the Most High, and for speaking the truth He will be slapped and spat upon and condemned as a blasphemer. When asked by the governor if He is a king, Jesus will confess that He is, though His Kingdom is not of this world. He

will be crowned – with thorns – and publicly elevated – on a cross – and will be openly proclaimed as “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” – by a sign mockingly placed above Him. Yet through all this, Jesus will give the greatest gift imaginable – the forgiveness of sins – with enough “left over” that all people, of all places and times, may be satisfied eternally.

On the third day, Christ would rise from His tomb, showing His rule extends even over death. And forty days later, He would ascend to the right hand of power, exalted in glory once more. Men had tried to seize Him by force to keep Him from being a king, but they could not stop the plan of salvation.

Even now, Jesus rules and reigns over all things in heaven and on earth. Right now, at this very moment, our King is guiding all things for the sake of His beloved bride, the Church. The man who sat beside the Sea of Galilee, teaching the crowds and providing for their needs, is the man who sits on the throne of heaven, still teaching through His word and providing for all our needs of body and soul.

He, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is the God who gives us our daily bread. As He showed Philip, He provides what we need even when it seems impossible. As He showed Andrew, He provides what we need even through things man thinks aren't enough. And as He showed the crowd, He provides, not what we think we need, but what we truly need. Believing all this, we rightly pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” and receive that bread with thanksgiving.

In the name of Jesus, amen.