

The Life of the World Is My Flesh
John 6:51-69
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 15, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Think back three Sundays, when we were hearing from *Mark's* gospel about Jesus dismissing the 5000 from the great feast, coming to his disciples upon the water, and calming the storm. Recall how that text ended: "They were utterly astounded, *for they did not understand about the loaves....*" Now, for the last few Sundays, we've heard Jesus explain the loaves... not only to his disciples, but to the crowds and the Jewish leaders. And, that discussion reaches its pinnacle today, when Jesus begins our text,

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Both the 'fathers in the wilderness' and the crowd of 5000 had miraculous provision of bread. But *that* bread is not the Gospel. *That* bread is not the bread of life. *That* bread is not living bread from heaven.

Jesus highlights more than just what is true **bread** (as if, "Once you were sustained one way, now I provide for you bread

another way”). Rather, he’s highlighting what is true *life*. Is life truly the fill of good for our body? No, because they had their fill and still died. Life in this world always ends in death.

Jesus now makes clear that true life is found only in God’s **dealing with man’s sin for eternal life** – *that* is the dealing, the *only* provision, the *only* daily sustenance that leads to the resurrection and life into the eternal age.

But Jesus also makes clear something else... something that most of American Christianity fails to consider... something that we in *our* view of God often fail to consider. Jesus makes clear that God **deals with man for eternal life** *only* through the flesh-and-blood Christ.

How often are we guilty of thinking that the *birth* of Christ, *death, resurrection and ascension* of Christ, *distribution* of Christ in the Sacrament, that all of those are great historical and doctrinal truths... but then in the throes of daily life we see no sustenance in any of that, but prefer a ‘mystical’ relationship with God, a relationship of ‘signs coming down from heaven’ or feelings welling from my heart. But in our text, Jesus makes clear: His incarnation is central to the Gospel and to the eternal plans of how God deals with mankind: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever.” (In other words, ‘if anyone believes that by this Christ he will be nurtured and sustained and kept unto eternal life, he will not be ashamed.’)

But, don't envision merely mystical/spiritual nurturing... you can't have the divine Christ without the human Christ: "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is *my flesh*."

Much of American Christianity spiritualizes this... they don't know how to deal with Jesus in the flesh and so they say, "Well of course he gave his flesh for the world on the cross, but he's now safely in heaven, so we're back to dealing with him spiritually." But is that how the Jews in the text heard his comments? Our text says, "The Jews then *disputed* among themselves (his words caused a great argument among his hearers), 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'"

Without realizing it, the Jews were closer to understanding Jesus for us in the Sacrament than is most of Christianity in America. Americans want to say, "Yes, Jesus is true Man. But His humanity is sort of stuck in the heavenly places, and really he deals with us by our spiritual feasting on His Word."

True, we do spiritually feast on His Word. But it's also true that He gives us himself... and you can't divide his 'divine self' from his 'human self.' If He is the living bread from heaven, then *all* of him is – true God and true man. To rely upon Jesus spiritually while being unwilling to rely upon his flesh and blood is to divide the true Christ.

The Jewish leaders assumed they had the true faith, were the heirs of the covenant, and couldn't be taught anything more about the Messiah... certainly not an incarnate flesh-and-blood one. So

Jesus responds, **“Truly, Truly** (notice, something of divine weight is about to be said)... Truly, Truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

This response is so weighty and causes such a stir that sinners everywhere are rattled by it. They hear Jesus say, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you,” and they ask, “Then what of little children who don’t commune... are they not saved?” For this reason some even feed their infants communion, out of fear that anyone who does not have the Sacrament will die in condemnation!

Friends, stick to the text. Jesus is speaking to a specific audience: scoffing Jewish leaders, self-righteous about their standing before God and rejecting any notion of a Christ who would come in human flesh. And to those Jewish leaders specifically, Jesus says, “Truly, truly I say *to you*.” That should be the first clue of Jesus’ intention. For example, when Jesus says to the thief on the cross, “Truly, truly I say *to you*, today you will be with me in paradise,” do any of us feel the need to apply that to ourselves – “Oh joy! Once I read these words, I activate a promise that before the end of today, I will know heavenly bliss!” No! He was speaking to a specific audience – the thief on the cross. It’s the same in our text, at first a specific audience: to the hard-hearted Jews, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless

you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

You know what else that sounds like? Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus: self-assured that he can figure out the things of heaven, that he can see heaven through his own reason and study and knowledge... and Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Notice, how the “unless” works in both cases to humble unbelieving scoffers. It’s as if Jesus says, “You *think* heaven is already yours... but if you reject the way in which God works through His Christ to serve and save his people, your pride precedes your fall.”

But Jesus always follows with a great promise of the Gospel, “*Whoever* feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.” That’s pure Gospel! Christ in his flesh and blood is for you; He put his flesh and blood on the cross for your sin and now gives you the benefits of that cross by putting his flesh and blood in the Sacrament for you, that you may be sustained by *Him* all your days!

Friends, that Gospel to whoever eats and drinks in faith (“you have eternal life”) and that Law to unbelieving scoffers “unless you eat and drink” ... that Law and Gospel safeguards us from following the pride of the Jewish leaders and dismissing our utter need for the Sacrament.

How many times in life have *you* seen the Sacrament as something for the pious to show their great faith, but when life gets

difficult, you felt it more important to take time away from the things of God to “fix this problem by myself, to strengthen my daily life, *then* I’ll return to the Sacrament where pious Christians go.” If we were honest, isn’t that how most of the Church in America handled Covid! (And now, with new mandates on the horizon, will be tempted to handle Covid Round II?)

But, to borrow Paul’s words from last week’s epistle, “That’s not how you learned Christ!” Christ doesn’t give you his flesh and blood to eat and drink to *show yourself approved* by God. He doesn’t give it as a ‘take it or leave it’ suggestion ... He gives it “for you... for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of faith”... for those who are weary, burdened by sin: “Come unto Me... I will give you rest.”

And yet, how often is it that exact moment sins are exposed or faith is ‘challenged’ that we then back away and distance ourselves from the Sacrament we need, the Sacrament God gives for this very moment and purpose. Again, how easy to appeal to Covid, but certainly in daily trials beyond that: In our self-righteousness, we say “I will handle this. I don’t need that”: You’re struggling with temptation, or arguing with a family member or church friend, or your marriage is on the rocks, or you are called to repentance and – because you don’t like hearing any of it or find it easier to ignore rather than wrestle with Law and Gospel – you decide it’s advantageous to stay away from Word and Sacrament.

But, friends, isn't that the same prideful defiance the Jewish leaders had? And what does Jesus say to those who stay away from His flesh and blood in pride of their *own* flesh and blood? He says, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." In other words, if you are going to refuse the life of *his* flesh and blood, to glory in the life of *your* flesh and blood, your flesh and blood *will* give way to death, and you will find yourself in eternal despair."

To paraphrase Luther, if you pinch yourself and have flesh and blood, you need Christ's flesh and blood. Your flesh is good for nothing; His flesh is for the life of the world. You *need* Christ's flesh and blood, not as a legal checkbox of piety, but because Christ himself is the living bread that came down from heaven, and the bread he gives for the life of the world is his flesh.

But our propensity toward prideful self-righteousness... Our propensity (like the Jews before us) to think that a spiritual life with God can be had apart from the flesh and blood Jesus ... *that* is the reason Jesus says to the Jews, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." There's no life in the one who thinks he is above a life of repentance and forgiveness within the Church that together inhales/exhales repentance and forgiveness. And being strengthened in that life of repentance and forgiveness unto eternal life is not accomplished by Israelite manna from heaven or even by God-given daily bread; it's done most

graciously and gloriously by the Christ who cares for us spiritually and sacramentally. So then, what comfort at the invitation and promise of our text, “*Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*”

Friends, when you partake of the Sacrament and then sing Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis*, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace...” (and when you raise your baptized children to look forward to the same) you confess that – strengthened by the Supper – you can now look forward to that eternal life that is yours as the baptized, that promise that Christ will raise you up on the last day. *This* is the care Jesus sealed for you on the cross and poured out for you from his hands and side... “my blood is true drink” he says, so that “whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”

Abides in me... just as Jesus also said, ‘If you *abide* in my *Word,*’ and again, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches.... *Abide* in me, and I in you.’ You abide in him not just spiritually, but sacramentally ...sustained by the divine life of his flesh and blood, even unto life everlasting. His Sacrament is just as sustaining a gift for you as the Word that makes that Sacrament. This is Jesus’ promise to you, that he took on flesh and blood to feed you eternal life.

Sadly, these flesh-and-blood promises are not loved by all: “After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked

with him.” How many follow Jesus’ teaching *until he hints at the Lord’s Supper...* and by that I mean not just that it *is* his body and blood, but also that it *is* God’s planned sustenance for the penitent, for those who live a life of repentance and forgiveness *with neighbor* and *before God*, those who know that there is no greater nourishment in daily bread, no greater heavenly gift than the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. And why is it such a precious gift? Peter confesses it well to conclude our text: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” Notice that, not *just* that Jesus has eternal words to comfort and cheer... but that He – in human flesh and blood – *is* the Holy One of God, come down from heaven. God *incarnate* – just as was prophesied and came to pass. To abide in Christ, to dine with Christ, to feast on Christ: *that* is true food and true drink that leads to eternal life when he will raise you up on the last day.

*In the Name of the Father
and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit
+ AMEN +*

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
August 15, 2021