

LIVING BREAD

John 6:51-69

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

August 15, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 6, verses 51 through 69. This is the conclusion of Jesus' bread of life discourse. His teaching becomes increasingly difficult, to the point where it is actually offensive. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 6, beginning at verse 51, we read in Jesus' name.

⁵¹ 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."

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, "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. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" ⁶¹ But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe." (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) ⁶⁵ And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

⁶⁶ After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, ⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

Christianity is a difficult religion. I'll explain what I mean, but first I'll explain what I don't mean. I do not mean that the requirements are more strenuous than other religions. Every other religion has some requirement in order to get in, or some steps to accomplish in order to achieve a higher level, or something along those lines. But the Christian faith is completely different in that it is a religion of grace. Jesus Christ has already achieved everything, and he gives it to us as

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a gift of grace through faith. So Christianity is not difficult in the sense that we have to work hard to please God. God is already perfectly pleased with his children through Jesus Christ.

Instead, what I mean when I say that Christianity is a difficult religion, is that the teachings of Christianity can be hard to accept. In the Holy Scriptures, God reveals certain things that we don't really want to be true. They reveal truths that this fallen and corrupted world rejects. This world is a messed up place. I think you know this. And the Christian faith challenges the world. The Scriptures teach a way of thinking, living, and believing that is contradictory to the way the world thinks, lives, and believes. And I think you already know this too. If you didn't already know this, you probably wouldn't be here. If you believe that this world is just fine, and if you believe that you are just fine, then there's really no point in being here. But we are here because we are not okay. Our natural way of living, and our natural way of thinking is not right. And this means that the teachings of Christianity are hard to accept. They challenge everything about us. So as we learn this Christian faith and grow in it, we will hear things that don't seem right to us. We should expect that. And when we hear things that don't seem right, we should wrestle with them. You will—assuming that you're paying attention even a little bit—you will hear me say something from this pulpit that you don't think is right. When that happens, you should talk to me about it. It may turn out to be one of those things where Scripture challenges you to change your way of thinking. Or it may be that I'm wrong. And if I'm wrong, each of you have a responsibility to correct me. So you should come and talk to me and tell me what doesn't seem right.

Last Sunday I called out ten different sins or errors, some of which are quite controversial, even within Christianity. It was a lot more than a typical sermon. And I was a little bit surprised, but more so disappointed, that no one challenged me on any of them. I doubt that you all agreed with me on all of them. You can challenge me. Stop by the office or call me on the phone. I promise not to insult you or disrespect you for thinking differently. We need to have charitable conversations about topics of disagreement. That's how we learn and come to a common understanding of truth. If you disagree with me on something, I'd like to understand your viewpoint. Sermons are not very conversational. I can't ask you questions, at least not ones I expect an immediate response to, and you can't ask me questions during it. I can try to anticipate what questions you might have, but that's hard to do. So come and talk to me. You're bound to have questions or objections. The Christian faith can be very difficult to accept.

And this is true concerning both the doctrine of the Law and the doctrine of the Gospel. These are the two great doctrines of Scripture. The doctrine of the Law teaches us what we must do, and the doctrine of the Gospel teaches us what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Both of these doctrines are difficult to accept, but for different reasons.

The doctrine of the Law is difficult to accept, because the Law tells us that we are not right. It condemns our actions, but not merely our actions. It also condemns our words, and even our thoughts and motivations. It teaches us that we are wrong. It also teaches us that we are incapable of fixing the problem. All of this is difficult to accept.

The doctrine of the Gospel is even more difficult to accept, because it's free. It's not the way the world really works. There's nothing in the Christian faith to be earned, but we want the satisfaction of earning something. So even if the Law of God is difficult to accept, we still want to be saved by some kind of Law. The freeness of the Gospel means there is no glory outside of Christ.

So I think those religions with strict standards or challenging steps to master might actually be easier to accept. They appeal more to our natural minds. They can give you a sense of

accomplishment. In other words, they offer you the opportunity to be your own god. A religion is easier to accept if it says, “Yeah, you have some problems, but you can handle it.” But the religion revealed in the pages of Scripture does not do that. Instead, it reveals difficult truths that we don’t really want to be true. Instead of saying, “You can do it,” and, “Here’s what you need to do in order to be an exceptional person,” it says, “You can’t do it,” and, “You don’t deserve this,” but, “Believe this. Eat this. Drink this. Find your hope in Jesus Christ.” This is difficult, because we don’t really want it to be true. The teachings of Scripture often offend us

In this passage, Jesus’ words are very offensive. And it kind of seems like he’s trying to be offensive. To a certain degree, I think he is, but only to those who are already offended by him. He pushes those who don’t really believe in him to the point where they leave.

The ministry of Jesus is kind of strange. Very few people followed him because of what he taught. That is, very few people actually believed his words. He drew crowds of thousands and thousands by performing miracles. He healed the sick, drove out demons, fed thousands, and even raised the dead. People followed because they saw signs. But they didn’t understand what the signs meant, and they didn’t believe Jesus’ words.

Much of Jesus’ teaching was done in parables. And the common perception about parables is that Jesus used them in order to illustrate his teaching or give life to it. Effective teachers know how to use stories in order to clarify their teaching. You state a proposition, then you tell a story to illustrate it. In this way, stories help people understand. And so we assume that’s what Jesus was doing with parables. But, at least with many of them, that’s not what Jesus was doing, because sometimes it was just the parable with no explanation. He would simply tell a story, and he wouldn’t say what the point was, so the crowds really had no idea what he was talking about. He did this with the parable of the sower, and afterward the disciples asked him why he spoke to the people in parables. Jesus said that he spoke in parables in order to reveal the secrets of the kingdom to some, but hide them from others (Matt. 13:10-15).

And as long as Jesus spoke in parables, the crowds followed him. They followed him because of the miracles. They wanted healing, or they wanted free bread. And they didn’t really mind so much that they had no idea what he was talking about. It’s kind of funny: as long as they didn’t know what Jesus was talking about, everything was cool. But whenever Jesus dropped the parables, people were offended. When he spoke clearly, the crowds left. And this especially happened whenever Jesus started talking about his own death. That’s when they said, “I don’t really want this.”

And that’s what we see in this gospel lesson. This passage occurs the day after the feeding of the five thousand. If you’ve been here the last month or so, you’ve maybe noticed that this is now the fifth week in a row that we’ve talked about the feeding of the five thousand. First, we considered the miracle itself in *The Gospel of Mark*. The next week we heard about Jesus walking on water, which occurred in the middle of the night following that miracle. And this is now the third week that we’ve been in John 6, where Jesus explains the meaning of the sign. So the crowd is those people who followed Jesus across the Sea of Galilee the next morning. They wanted more bread. They got something infinitely better. Jesus explained to them that he is “**the living bread that came down from heaven,**” so that they might eat of this bread and live forever (6:51). This is infinitely better, but they didn’t want it, so they left.

And this is the sin we find in this text. It’s unbelief. More specifically, it’s the kind of unbelief that doesn’t allow God to tell us how things are. You can believe there is a god but still be an unbeliever. The question is whether or not we believe in the true God. Believing in the true

God means that we accept what he has to say about himself. Our natural temptation is to create God in our own image. That is, we take the things we value, and we project them on to God. Whatever we think is good, that must be what God is. We all do this without even realizing how self-contradictory it is. This conception of God limits him to our own understanding and our own corrupt values. If God is true, he must be quite a bit different than we are. But as long as we expect God to be like us, we will not know the one true God.

The people were offended by Jesus, and especially the whole thing about eating his flesh. They said, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (6:52). We can understand their hesitancy. I have never personally met someone who thinks cannibalism is a good idea. This is a part of God’s Law that is obvious to almost everyone and easy to accept. Don’t eat other people. It’s not right, and it’s kind of gross.

But Jesus is not really talking about cannibalism. And it’s hard to tell if the people caught onto this. They should have, but I think they were unwilling to wrestle with Jesus’ words. When we wrestle with Jesus’ words, we see that he’s not talking about cannibalism. That’s because Jesus calls himself **“the living bread.”** When you eat something—anything—it’s almost always dead. Your cheeseburger is dead. Your salad is dead. Even if you did, theoretically, eat something alive, it would soon die by your act of eating it. So that food gives you life, but only for a short while. Your body extracts what it can from that food until the nutrients are gone. That is because the food is dead. But that’s not how it is when we eat Jesus’ flesh. He is **“the living bread,”** and our eating of that bread does not kill it. Instead, Jesus continues to live so that he can give us eternal life.

In the early Christian Church, especially while they were being persecuted by the Roman Empire, the Christians were accused of cannibalism, because people heard that during their services they eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus. And we do eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus. That’s what Jesus says the bread and the wine are, so we take him at his word, and we follow his instructions to eat and drink. But it’s not as if we chew up and digest his flesh. Jesus gives us his living body and blood, and we do not destroy it or kill it when we eat it. You do not digest Jesus’ body and blood, because Jesus is alive, and he cannot die again. Your digestive system does not have the power to destroy God. It’s also not like his body is chopped up and distributed in millions of little pieces. When you receive the bread, you’re not getting part of his toe, while another person gets part of his ear. No. In the bread and the wine, you are receiving the entire person of Jesus. You do not possess a part of him. You possess all of him. He comes to you, and you receive him into your body, not to remain until you digest the bread and wine, but to remain forever. So Jesus says, **“Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks by blood abides in me, and I in him”** (6:56). Jesus remains. The living bread gives everlasting life.

This is much easier to understand after Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper. John, of course, wrote his Gospel after Jesus’ ministry. The doctrine and practice of the Lord’s Supper was well known among Christians, so they could understand what Jesus is talking about. And we also can understand it, although it certainly remains mysterious. But when Jesus first spoke these words, he had not yet instituted the Lord’s Supper, and he had not yet been crucified and raised. So that first audience was confused and offended. “They disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ ”

Thus far, Jesus had only spoken about eating his flesh. So he hears their dispute, and he actually dials it up a notch. He says in verse 53, **“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.”** This is the first place he says anything about drinking his blood.

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And this would be especially offensive to Jewish ears. You've maybe heard of kosher laws before. Even to this day, practicing Jews abstain from certain kinds of food that the rest of us really enjoy, like most seafood, pork, and any meats that aren't "well done." They have to order their steaks with "no pink." That's because the Old Testament has laws forbidding these things. Christians, by the way, are free to enjoy these tasty meats, because Jesus declared all foods clean. The reference on that is Mark 7:19. Remember that verse, because it's your ticket to bacon and medium-rare steaks. And some of these laws, we don't know exactly why God commanded them. There may have been some health reasons, like pigs having more diseases back then. A big part of it was that these laws distinguished Israel from the nations. They set them apart as God's particular people. But concerning blood, it also has a prophetic significance, and Jesus brings that out here.

The law concerning blood is from Leviticus 17. God forbade the people of Israel from eating any blood, because, he said, "The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (Lev. 17:11). The life of the flesh is in the blood. That's why God commanded the Jews not to consume the blood of any animal. In the sacrifices, the blood was poured out and some of it was sprinkled on the altar to make atonement for sins. The blood went to God. So even when the people were just eating in their homes, they were not to consume any of the blood. It wasn't for them.

But the sacrifice of Jesus is different. It goes far beyond the animal sacrifices. He was killed for our sins. His blood was poured out, and he presented his blood before the Father in heaven (Heb. 9:11-14). But Jesus did not stay dead like all those other sacrifices. He rose again. And now he gives himself to us. He gives himself to us as living bread. And his living blood is the source of eternal life. He says, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Notice the connection between the blood and life. The same principle, which was the reason Old Testament believers were forbidden from eating blood, "The life of the flesh is in the blood," is the very same reason why we must now drink Jesus' blood. "The life of the flesh is in the blood." When we drink the blood of Jesus, we gain his life. None of those Old Testament sacrifices really forgave sins. They were merely placeholders, looking forward to Jesus Christ. And their blood couldn't give life. Once it was poured out, the animal was dead. That blood had no life-giving properties. But Jesus' blood does. It is the blood of the living God. The life of Jesus' flesh is in his blood. So instead of being forbidden from it, Jesus commands us to drink it.

Jesus is the bread of life. He is the living bread that came down from heaven. He offered his flesh to be torn open, and his blood to be poured out. This is the sacrifice that atones for your sins. And when we partake of his Holy Supper, that body and blood is given to you. It is given to you so that you might know, as surely as the elements touch your mouth, that Jesus forgives your sins. And if he has forgiven your sins, and if he has given you his living body and blood, he will also raise your body on the Last Day. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.