

FLESH AND BLOOD RELIGION

John 6:35-51

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 6, verses 35 through 51. This gospel lesson occurs the day after the feeding of the five thousand, when Jesus multiplied five loaves and two fish into enough food to feed five thousand men, plus women and children, and somehow have twelve baskets of leftovers. Some of those people followed Jesus across the Sea of Galilee in hopes of more bread. Jesus tells them to seek something better. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 6, beginning at verse 35, we read in Jesus' name.

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴² They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" ⁴³ Jesus answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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."

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 flesh and blood religion. And more than any other religion in the world, this is true for Christianity. It is unique in the sense that God came down in physical flesh. Every other religion in the world is an attempt to escape or transcend this world. But our God came down into this world. Every other religion attempts to escape or transcend this world and reach up to their god or achieve some higher level of humanity. This is even true for religions that don't think of themselves as religions. But the one true God came down into the world he

created. He even came down into a world corrupted by the fall into sin. He came down into a flesh and blood world subject to death. We have a flesh and blood God.

And this is the nature of Christianity. This is the nature of the religion revealed in the pages of Scripture. We have a flesh and blood God, and he came to redeem and restore our flesh and blood. So he meets us through physical elements. We do not encounter this God by transcending our physical flesh, but he comes to meet us where we are. He speaks audible words to us. Sometimes people talk about “hearing the voice of God.” And they’re almost always talking about something inaudible. That is, they don’t actually hear it with their ears, but they feel it in their hearts. When I say that God speaks to us in audible words, I mean that we actually hear the words of Scripture spoken to us. They are spoken by a physical person. And the physical, yet invisible soundwaves hit our eardrums, and so God comes to us by his Word. And he unites us with Christ through the physical water of Baptism. And Jesus feeds us with his body and blood under the physical forms of bread and wine. There’s something physical and external about Christianity that you won’t find anywhere else. That is because the Son of God, through whom the heavens and the earth were created, took on human flesh to redeem and restore his creation. So Christianity is a physical religion. This doesn’t minimize the spiritual nature of it. Rather, it joins the spiritual and physical together.

There’s a Lutheran university professor by the name of Rod Rosenblatt, and I’m going to steal his story. He’s retired now, but at the time he was teaching theology in an evangelical Christian university. And he was talking about the Lutheran view of the Lord’s Supper. One student raised her hand and said, “But professor, you can’t get spiritual benefits from physical elements.” And he said, “No, you’re with me on this one, you just don’t know it yet.” She said, “No I’m not.” He said, “Are you betting your eternal salvation on particular blood, shed by a particular Jewish man, on a particular cross, on a particular Friday afternoon?” Of course, she said, “Yes.” And the professor said, “Then you’re with me on this one.” That’s what we’re talking about with the Lord’s Supper. We’re talking about the real, physical body and blood of Jesus, by which he accomplished our eternal salvation. And this body and blood is delivered to us in physical forms.

Our evangelical friends object, saying that our trust in the Sacraments excludes faith. That couldn’t be farther from the truth. We trust the promise of God attached to physical elements. And that’s exactly what faith is. It is dependence and trust in the promises of God. The Sacraments do not save apart from faith. Faith receives the blessings God has attached to physical elements. So we believe Jesus when he says, **“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.”** (6:51).

So there’s a little bit of Christmas in the Lord’s Supper. The Son of God took on human flesh. He came to us in physical flesh to redeem and restore our physical flesh. And in the Lord’s Supper he comes to us under the physical elements of bread and wine, so that we receive him with our mouths. Christianity is a flesh and blood religion.

We’re even looking forward to a flesh and blood resurrection on the Last Day. When Jesus talks about living forever, he means that he will raise your physical body when he returns.

I want you to do something here. Hold up your pinky finger. I don’t usually ask much of you during a sermon, except that you listen. But I want everyone to do this. Hold up your pinky finger. Look at it. That’s the pinky finger you will have in the resurrection. And you know why? Because God cares about your pinky finger. God created that pinky finger. And Jesus redeemed your pinky finger and every other part of your body. Keep holding your pinky finger up. Is it

starting to get tired? Mine is, a little bit. Your pinky finger is not perfect. It might not be very strong. It may not work quite right. There will probably come a day when it doesn't work at all, because your entire body will quit working. And then your pinky finger will start to decompose. You can put your pinky finger down now. Jesus will raise and perfect your pinky finger. He says, **“This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day”** (6:39). That includes your pinky finger, because every part of you has been given to Jesus. He redeemed you with his own flesh and blood. Jesus goes on, **“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day”** (6:40). And when Jesus raises us on the Last Day, he will make us right. Your pinky finger and every other part of your body will work exactly as God designed. Sin will have no more effect on Jesus' believing saints. It won't just be our spirits that are transformed, but also our bodies. The Son of God took on human flesh and blood to redeem and restore us as whole persons. This is what we mean when we say that Christianity is a flesh and blood religion.

With this text, as with every text, we should ask, *What sin does this passage diagnose?*

Most especially, Jesus calls out the sin of unbelief. That was the issue with those listening to him. Many of them were among those present when Jesus multiplied the bread. But they did not believe Jesus when he said, **“I am the bread of life”** (6:35-36). They did not believe that he came from God. They did not believe that he would give his flesh for the life of the world. And in the text for next Sunday, we will hear that they were offended by Jesus' statement that they must feed on his flesh and drink his blood (6:53-61).

And the thing that made it hard for them to believe is that they actually knew Jesus. This is kind of ironic. We probably think that it would be easier to believe if God revealed himself before our very eyes. But that's not really how it worked with Jesus. He demonstrated the power of God, and a few people believed, but most of them didn't, because when all was said and done, they were still looking at a man. They were still looking at a flesh and blood human being. And one of the errors that is common to man, is to imagine a wide division between the spiritual and the physical. We imagine God to be distant and invisible. We know that we are sinful and corrupt, even if we don't admit it. So we imagine a clean God, who is different and far off. So when Jesus breaks our rule and comes among us in flesh and blood, we just don't know what to do with that. He demolishes the division between the spiritual and the physical, and it makes us uncomfortable.

So a heresy arose quite early in the Christian Church that imagined a wide division between spiritual and physical things. Spiritual things were seen as good, while physical things were seen as evil. We talked a little about this last week, but I want to consider it a bit more this week, because this error still persists today. In fact, we see it all around us, not just in the Church. It's the way the world thinks. They may not think of physical things as evil, but they certainly imagine a wide division between the spiritual and physical realms. And that's the real problem. But God has no division. And in this passage, Jesus shoves his flesh and blood right in our faces. He makes us deal with it.

For you nerds out there, the heresy was called “Gnosticism,” with a silent “G” at the beginning, kind of like how the word “knowledge” has a silent “K.” For you non-nerds, it's enough just to know what the error is. The Gnostics believed that spiritual things are good, and the physical world is bad. Many of them even went so far as to deny that Jesus had a physical body. For them, salvation meant transcending or escaping this physical body to apprehend the

spiritual. Gnosticism was quickly condemned by the entire Christian Church, but there still remains, to this day, a temptation to divide the physical and the spiritual. The error is simply not recognizing that God has created us as physical and spiritual beings.

There are many sins or errors that have Gnostic tendencies. I'll mention a few of them. And it's not like Gnosticism is the entire problem. Dividing the spiritual and the physical isn't the only thing that makes these things wrong, but it's at least part of it.

Sexual sins, especially, have a Gnostic character to them. God designed sex to bind husband and wife together physically and spiritually. And this is very good. But sexual sins always try to deny either the physical or the spiritual bond. On one hand, we might justify sex before or even outside of marriage as just being physical. *It doesn't mean anything. It's just a physical activity that we do for enjoyment.* That is, we try to have the physical without the spiritual. But no matter how hard we try to avoid it, the physical connection creates a spiritual connection. That's how God designed, and we can't avoid it.

Or we might go the other way with pornography or lust. That is, it's just something on a screen or in our minds. We think it doesn't affect the physical union we have with our wives or husbands, but it does.

Transgenderism might be the most obvious example. There's the idea that the mind is right and the body is wrong. It's like the mind is the true self, so we should ignore what the body says or change the body to try to fit what the mind is feeling. The fall into sin affects both our minds and our bodies. We are subject to injury and disease on both fronts. Sometimes the body is injured. Sometimes the mind is injured. When the body is injured, we work to heal the body. And we should do the same when the mind is injured. We should not injure the body to make it fit with the mind. When something is out of order with God's creation, the best thing we can do is work to bring it back into harmony. And perhaps understanding this as an injury would help us be more compassionate. If someone has a broken leg, we don't say, "You're weird," or, "You'd be more of a man if your leg worked." That's just cruel. It's also cruel to do that to someone who experiences gender dysphoria. We can love them in a way that affirms them as God's creatures without having to lie about who God made them to be. And part of the problem—not all of it, but part of it—is that the world has accepted narrow stereotypes of what a man is and what a woman is. There's nothing intrinsically feminine about the color pink. You can be a man, and pink can be your favorite color. You can be a girl and play with tractors. You can be a boy and play with baby dolls. There is nothing wrong with that. God made male and female distinct. Our bodies are different, and our personalities are different. This is obvious. Everyone knows this, even those who pretend to not know it. But we also have things in common. Men are usually stronger. We see this in their bodies and their personalities. But women also have strength. Women are usually more nurturing. We see this in their personalities and in their bodies. But men also nurture. We can identify personality traits that are stronger among men, and others that are stronger among women. But none of them are exclusive to one sex or the other. Every positive personality trait is a reflection of God's nature. So when a boy plays with a doll, or a man takes care of a baby, he's simply reflecting the nurturing character of God. And when a girl plays with a toy tractor, or a woman drives the real thing, she's simply reflecting the industrious character of God. Whenever a man or a woman works, or fights, or plays, or builds, or cooks, or grows something, or draws, or sings, or cries at a movie, they are simply reflecting the character of God that he built into all humans, both male and female. None of this means that the mind is out of balance with the body.

Abortion also has a gnostic element to it. There's a physical presence in the womb that no one can deny. You can't even deny that it's human. But we don't experience the personality of

the child yet. And maybe that's part of why we don't respect the humanity of the child. If we see the mind or the personality as the true self, then it's easier to dispose of the body. But that body is God's creation.

We might commit the same error when we neglect to feed the poor. God created them, and God cares for their bodies. Jesus came in the flesh to redeem their bodies. In the Church, our primary work is to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, but as Christians, we are also called to care for physical needs. Focusing on the spiritual does not give us a right to ignore the physical.

Here's a different form of Gnosticism: escapism. I was at Bible camp earlier this week, and I was talking with the camp director. He interacts with young people all the time. And he brought up the issue of escapism, especially among young men. They escape from this physical world into a virtual reality of video games. And I'm not really opposed to video games. This director wasn't either. I kind of like some of them, and there's a certain amount of escaping that can be healthy. But many video games are designed to be addictive and drag us far beyond what is healthy. And when you get dragged down that path, your mind ends up in a different world that is detached from this physical world.

In general, screens do this to us. I'm talking about your TV, computer, tablet, and phone. They draw us into a world that doesn't really exist. They tell stories that may or may not correspond to reality, but they seem like reality to us, because we see them with our own eyes, and God designed us to believe what we see with our eyes. And the technology isn't evil. It's about how we use it. Movies can communicate a reality to us that we've never experienced, and this is good. Most of us have never experienced the horrors of war, so a movie like *Saving Private Ryan* can give someone like me a glimpse into a reality I don't know. On the other hand, screens can create a fictional world detached from reality. Sometimes divorce is presented as having little or no effect on children. Other times the real damage is portrayed. Hollywood can do what they want with our screens. Homosexuality and transgenderism are almost always presented as normal and positive. Every action movie has a 110 pound girl beating up all the bad guys, as if that's the ideal woman. Sex before or outside of marriage rarely has any negative effects. None of these things are true in the real world, but we believe them, because we saw it with our eyes. In this way we are tricked into believing a reality that does not exist. It's divorced from the physical world.

I'll give you two more, and these especially have to do with the Church, because the problem isn't just out there. Modern worship has a gnostic tendency to it. It invites us to experience God on a mystical level. That is, to experience him apart from his Word and Sacraments. If you ever get to see behind the curtain, and I've seen a little bit, you find that there's a whole science to creating a certain experience. There is an optimal volume level, the ideal key for a song, the right number of times to repeat the chorus, what kind of lighting to use, where to set the thermostat, how to sequence different songs in order to evoke certain emotions, and much, much more. And we fall for it because we expect to meet God beyond this physical world. It's Gnosticism.

Last one, and this one hits close to home, because we're actually doing it right now: live streams. There is something physical about the Church. There's a fellowship to gathering together for worship that can't be duplicated online. Now I'm not opposed to the live stream. I wanted to set it up, and I think we should keep it. But when you use it, you should know that you're playing with fire. Watching church online is better than nothing, but it's also not good enough. There is a physical element to worship. And there is a relational nature to the congregation. The Holy Spirit calls us and gathers us together into one body. If it's impossible to gather together, a live stream can help to hold us together temporarily, but it cannot do it

permanently. If a member relies on it too long, that cord will snap. God designed us as spiritual and physical beings. As a congregation, we need to be together.

In all these various forms of Gnosticism, the physical and spiritual are separated. But that's not the way God works. God's creation is both spiritual and physical. We, as human beings, are both physical and spiritual. A person consists of body and soul. God himself is both physical and spiritual. Jesus took on human flesh. And he comes to us, spiritually, through physical forms. Christianity is a flesh and blood religion.

But our sinful natures prefer Gnosticism. I suppose part of it is that we're ashamed of the things we've done in the flesh. We don't want God to meet us in this world because we've screwed it up. This is where all our sin is. But if we can escape from this world, if we can meet God where he is, in some spiritual realm somewhere, well that's a world that we haven't screwed up yet. It's kind of like ... imagine that your house is rundown, and you haven't cleaned it, and it smells bad because you don't take the trash out, and let's say your toilet broke too, so there's a pile of "you-know-what" in the corner. And suddenly your friend wants to come over and visit. So you say, "Let's meet at Red Lobster," because you haven't trashed Red Lobster, probably. You can fake it somewhere else.

That's how we feel with God. Let's interact with him in the spiritual realm, because we haven't screwed that up yet, we think. We can fake it there, maybe. But Jesus comes to our house, and it's embarrassing. He comes in the flesh to this world. And all the "you-know-what" we've done in this world—he sees and smells it all. He did what we don't want. He came here ... in the flesh. It's embarrassing.

He came to deal with it. After all, it is his. He created it. So he comes to redeem and restore it. He already knows what's going on in our house. He knows what we have done in this body. And that's why he comes. He comes to clean it up. He comes to forgive us. He comes with body and soul, because we have sinned in body and soul. Our body and soul are thoroughly corrupted. He comes to us, as one of us, to suffer with us and for us. He gives himself to us. Christianity is not about escaping this flesh and blood existence. It's about Jesus coming to redeem and restore this body and soul. Christianity is a flesh and blood religion.

That's what the cross is. It's a flesh and blood event like none other. Jesus came in flesh and blood to have his flesh torn open and his blood poured out. And he yielded up his spirit. This is how he has redeemed your body and soul. And he rose again from the dead, not with a different body, but with that very same flesh and blood that had been ripped open and poured out. That flesh and blood was restored. And in the exact same way, your flesh and blood will be restored, perfectly and forever, even your pinky finger. We have a flesh and blood Savior. Amen.

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