

THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE

John 6:51-69

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

August 18, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 6, verses 51 through 69. This is the conclusion to the narrative that we've heard the last several weeks in the gospel lessons, where Jesus miraculously feeds five thousand men, plus women and children, with five loaves of bread and two fish, then in the middle of the night he walks on water to cross the Sea of Galilee, and the next morning the crowd catches up to him, and he explains what the miracle of bread means. 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."

You may be seated.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Our world is filled with lies. Now, is this true, or did I just lie to you? Let's think about it.

One of the ways we know this is by applying simple logic to the many contradictory truth claims we hear. Some people say there is a God. Others say there is no god. Both sides cannot be right. There's no way around it. Somewhere in there is a lie. Some people say that the true God is the Triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Many others say it is someone or something else. These contradictory claims cannot all be true. They could all be false, but no more than one of them can be true. Somewhere in there, are many lies. Some people say God created the universe in six days by his powerful Word. Others say that random events over billions of years slowly formed the universe into the orderly system we now observe. They can't both be true. Somewhere in there are lies. Christians say that human life is intrinsically valuable, because God created us in his image. Others say that the value of a person depends on whether or not someone else wants them or the function they serve to society. Both sides cannot be right. Somewhere in there are lies. Without even examining these specific issues, we can observe that the mere existence of the debates proves that this world is filled with lies. It can't all be true; therefore, there are lies.

Now I want to make a distinction between a lie, on one hand, and a liar or the act of lying, on the other. There's a difference. There's a big difference. A liar is someone who intentionally tries to mislead another person. They say something that is not true, and they know that it is not true. But a lie, on the other hand, is simply a proposition that is not true. A person can tell a lie without knowing it's a lie. And, morally, that's a lot different than intentionally trying to deceive. We should certainly be careful with what we say, so that we do not unwittingly say something that is false. But an accidental lie is not the same as an intentional lie. Most of the lies we hear, especially regarding the big theological, philosophical, moral, and political issues, are repeated by people who think they are telling the truth. We should be sympathetic to this, even compassionate. We should resist accepting anything that is false, but we do not need to accuse other people of willfully trying to deceive other people.

Many people believe lies and perpetuate lies, because they believe them to be true. No one tells the truth all the time, even if we are trying to tell the truth. Only God tells the truth all the time. I've preached, probably, about five hundred sermons here. Now, I don't know what, but I'm pretty sure I have said something to you that is not true. I have probably spoken a lie from this pulpit. And that's really frightening to acknowledge. We can be deceived without knowing it.

So where do lies come from? And how do we know the truth?

Every lie, ultimately, has its source in the devil. He spoke the first lie when he said to the woman in the garden, "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). And the woman, along with her husband, eventually believed this lie. So they did what God had commanded them not to do. Lies infected their hearts, and the lies became fruitful and multiplied and filled the earth and subdued it. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus calls the devil "**the father of lies**" (8:44). Every lie, every false proposition, whether it's first uttered by the devil, his demons, or man, ultimately has its source in the devil, "**the father of lies.**"

The world is black and white. Some things may seem gray to us, but not to God, and not in reality. There is truth, and there is error. Since we still have a sinful nature, even as Christians, part of our heart is still pulled to the lies of the world. So it's tempting to be a moderate between the Word of God and the philosophy of the world. But to be a moderate between God and the world is the same as to be a moderate between good and evil. Is that really something we want to

take the middle road on? Even those things that don't seem like a big deal to us, every lie is from the devil, and he delights in every lie, because they erode the foundation of the truth. And it's easy to go along with lies. In our culture, those who insist on lies are harsh, vindictive, and threatening. And it's tempting to just go along in order to stay out of their path. But the problem isn't really unbelievers who are deceived into believing something false. We should expect the world to live by lies. The problem is when Christians are deceived into believing lies, or when Christians know the truth, but are too fearful to speak it and too apathetic to teach it to our children. Or, sometimes, the problem can be when we fight back against the world the same way they fight against us, instead of simply speaking the truth about sin while proclaiming forgiveness at the same time.

The world is filled with lies. And we are vulnerable to being deceived. So how do we know the truth? It's about understanding where the lies come from and, especially, where the truth comes from. Every lie, ultimately, comes from the devil. And every truth comes from the Triune God.

In the epistle lesson from Ephesians 5, we heard Paul say, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 5:6). Then he goes on to talk about darkness and light (5:8), evil and the will of the Lord (5:16-17). The only way to know the truth and to walk in the light is to know the will of the Lord.

The Old Testament lesson took us to Proverbs 9, where God invites us to come and walk in wisdom. The key statement comes in verse 10: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." And there are at least four other places in the Old Testament that say the same thing, or something very similar (Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 15:33). I've been thinking about this verse a lot lately. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." What does it mean to fear the LORD? We've talked about this in a few different ways. One of the ways is that it means he is the one we do not want to disappoint or disobey. We might also fear our parents or teachers. We don't want to disappoint them or go against them. And it's right to fear them, just not as much as the LORD. But idolatry is when we fall to the temptation to fear something we should not fear at all, and, especially, to place that idol above the one true God. So we should examine ourselves, *whose approval do I really want? Who am I afraid to disobey, or disappoint, or to go against?* The biggest temptation is to seek the approval of the world. More specifically, that might mean the approval of our friends, classmates, or coworkers. How many likes can you get on Facebook? We might fear that the world will persecute us, cancel us, or just mock us for believing what God has spoken. We are tempted to not want to go against the world, and just follow along. But if we accept the lies of the world, then we are going against the LORD, and that is foolishness. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

There's a companion verse that comes up a few times in the Old Testament. It says the same thing, but just from the other side of the coin, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1; 53:1).

So put those two verses together. Foolishness is saying there is no God, or, perhaps, living as if there is no God. But "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." We should allow this to recalibrate the way we think about foolishness and wisdom. We often think of wisdom in a worldly way. We learn from our successes and failures, and we apply those lessons as we grow in worldly wisdom. And there's something to that. Gray hairs can be a sign of wisdom. But the greatest lesson to learn is to fear the LORD. That's the beginning of wisdom. And that's a wisdom that a child can have, but a gray-haired old man might reject. That child has the beginning of

wisdom, but the gray-haired old man who says there is no God is an utter fool. This means that our world is filled with highly-educated, distinguished, and wealthy people who are fools. Our culture praises them. But their education, or their money, or the praises of the masses have deluded them into thinking they have no need of God. And there are dropouts and addicts and felons who are wise, because they have learned the fear of the LORD.

So how do we know the truth? How do we gain wisdom? By listening to the smart fools who say there is no God? They're deluded with pride. Do not seek their approval. But listen to the words of the LORD.

His words are not always easy to hear. In fact, they are often quite difficult, especially when our hearts are tempted to follow the foolishness of an unbelieving world.

We see a great example of this in the Gospel lesson. Jesus tells a crowd of people that have been following him that he is the bread of life (6:35, 41, 51), and they cannot earn eternal life by keeping the Law of Moses (6:29), but in order to live forever they must eat his flesh and drink his blood (6:53-58). It's hard for them to hear.

Remember, this happens the day after Jesus fed the five thousand. Counting women and children, there were probably over ten thousand people there. And a lot of those people went home in the evening after Jesus fed them, but there was still a large crowd that remained and followed Jesus. But he tells them this difficult truth, and it turns them off, so that only his twelve disciples remain. John says, "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him" (6:66). That's tragic. Jesus had a megachurch of people who were following him, but for the wrong reasons. So he told them a hard truth for the sake of these twelve who actually believed in him, but it was really only eleven.

There were two big things Jesus said that turned off these Jewish followers. The first was that they could not please God through their own works. We talked about this a couple weeks ago. They asked him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" (6:28). And Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (6:29). Jesus taught faith, not works. And this assaults our pride. If our good deeds don't gain us any favor with God, then we have nothing to boast about (Eph. 2:9), and we like to boast, even if it's just in our own hearts.

The second thing that offended them was all this talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. This is difficult for anyone to accept. We're against cannibalism, and so is God. But Jesus isn't talking about cannibalism, he's talking about the Lord's Supper. The Jews don't understand that yet, and neither do the twelve disciples. But this is especially difficult for a Jew to understand, because they were forbidden from consuming any kind of blood, even the blood of animals.

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” (6:53).

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.

For many of the Jews, this was hard to accept. But the twelve remained. So Jesus said, “Do you want to go away as well?” (6:67). And sometimes we kind of chuckle at the foolishness of the twelve. But sometimes they say the most beautiful things. Simon Peter said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (6:68). So what if his teaching is difficult to hear? His words are eternal life. The world, deceived by the devil, hates his words. Our hearts, corrupted by sin and in love with the world, hate his words. But so what? These are the words of eternal life.

We should believe the Word of God simply because it’s true. That’s a good enough reason to believe anything. Truth is inherently good, even if we don’t gain anything by it. But the benefit of God’s Word goes far beyond simply being factually correct; it grants eternal life. Jesus says, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (6:54). Amen.

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