

Pentecost 13, 8.22.2021

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Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-60

“Lord, to whom can we go?”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

For the past five weeks the readings have focused on the theme of “Jesus, the Bread of Life.” In today’s conclusion to this theme, we hear Peter’s startling confession, “*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*” We are used to hearing and singing these words as we prepare to hear the gospel read in worship.

As Lutherans we are used to hearing about word and sacrament as the means of grace. A colleague of mine who taught Greek and New Testament at the Lutheran Seminary in Tokyo once said, “Even if the pastor has trouble getting the message across in the sermon, it is impossible to mess up Holy Communion because Jesus himself is present.”

The reality of word and sacrament is that each Sunday we receive Jesus the bread of life in two ways, in the spoken word and in the real presence of the bread and the wine. Sermons can seem like a “your mileage may vary” thing, meaning some Sundays they really speak deeply to us addressing a need, a question, or a hurt. But even if the sermon seems to fly over our heads, or fly right past us because we are preoccupied with some pressing life problem, Jesus Christ comes to us in the breaking of the bread.

In the Eucharist we stretch out our hands to receive the living presence of Christ; we eat his flesh and drink his blood; he abides in us, and we abide in him. In the Eucharist we see and become the visible body of Christ in the world. The very act of stretching out our hands reminds us that all we have begins with God’s grace and the gift of life. In stretching out our hands we are reminded of Luther’s last words, “We are all beggars.” Into these hands is placed the bread of life.

Last week I used a phrase we all know, “You are what you eat.” If we eat a steady diet of junk food, our bodies become toxic and our health fails. Yet long before modern nutritional science, early Christians knew in Jesus, as they ate of his body, he came to abide in them and they in him. The great early church theologian, Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386), wrote that in receiving Jesus, the living bread, “we come to bear Christ in us, and because Christ lives in us, we become holy people.” Cyril writes,

With full assurance let us partake of the Body and Blood of Christ: for in the Bread is given to you His Body, and in the Wine His Blood; so that by partaking of the Body and

Blood of Christ, you may be made of the same body and the same blood with Him. For in this way, we come to bear Christ in us.

In receiving the bread and the cup at the table, Christ abides in us, sharing eternal life with us, changing us into holy people, his body the church for the world.

John's gospel has no narrative of the institution of the Last Supper, yet in John 6 Jesus taught his disciples that they must receive him in the bread and the wine. Lutheran sacramental theology of the "real presence" of Jesus depends upon this eating and drinking of Jesus. In the sermon we hear the proclamation of grace and forgiveness, and in the sacrament of the holy table we touch and taste the living grace of Jesus who abides in us. You become what you eat.

Yet as today's gospel reminds us, Jesus' disciples found this teaching very hard to understand and accept. The disciples said, "*This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?*" The Greek text is literally, "The word (*logos*) is hard." A play on words is suggested here: Jesus himself, the Logos the Word of God, is this difficult teaching.

Jesus' teaching was so difficult that John tells us "*many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.*" Five weeks ago, the "Bread of Life" theme began with the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and people followed Jesus thinking that Jesus was just a supplier of daily food, bread and fish. Jesus challenged them saying, "*Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.*"

Today's gospel is one of those moments when we hear Jesus' humanity in the disappointment of his voice. Knowing that people had stopped following him, Jesus said to the twelve disciples, "*Do you also wish to go away?*" Jesus had challenged the crowds, who wanted him only for the bread and fish, and now Jesus asked his disciples to make a decision about him. Peter with bold words, answered for all of them saying, "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*"

Now there are plenty of places that we can try to go for "bread" – for words that will feed our minds and our hearts. Ideologies, economic theories, and political rhetoric are all places that human beings go seeking to be fed. The ideologies, theories, and rhetoric of the world can, of course, feed our egos, and briefly quench our thirst for control and meaning in a chaotic world, yet they never fully satisfy us because they do not lead to eternal life. Rather, they often require us to take sides, hate or even demonize our opponents. In the process, we demonize ourselves. In seeking to fully express our humanity, we become inhumane toward our neighbors. Only the abiding presence of

Jesus completes our humanity; only Jesus' words give eternal life.

We see the signs of these words around us every day in the self-centeredness, sinfulness, and evil of the world. Paul describes this in the reading from Ephesians today, writing, "*For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*" Paul is describing the vast power of evil in the world and the cosmic struggle we are involved in.

So when Peter said, "*Lord to whom can we go?*" he was voicing a very real and ultimate concern: in the struggle with evil only Jesus has the words of eternal life. Only Jesus, Word and Sacrament, can fill our inner hunger for forgiveness and new life.

It should not be surprising that Martin Luther wrote that Christ himself is the sacrament. For Luther, the sacraments are signs of the single sacrament, or mystery, that is Christ (Luther wrote this regarding 1 Timothy 3:16 in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*). "*Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life,*" describes Jesus the Word and Sacrament – Jesus the mystery of God revealed in the flesh.

Yet we have often domesticated Jesus, robbing him of his power to help us. We have, at times, sentimentalized him as our friend, as a sandy blond haired muscular big brother, rather than as the eternal Word and the Bread of Heaven; rather than the *Salvator mundi* – the Savior of the world. We cannot have the humanity of Jesus without his divinity; we cannot have eternal life without his flesh, the bread of heaven.

Today's readings are meant for us to choose life, to choose the bread of heaven, by choosing Jesus who gives us eternal life. Like Joshua at Shechem saying, "*choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord,*" so Peter spoke, as Peter usually did, boldly saying, "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*"

Jesus' teaching is difficult. It requires that we abide in him and he in us. It means partaking of his real presence in the bread and the wine – frequently and "often" as Luther said in the *Large Catechism*. Jesus' teaching is difficult because forget his words that "*the flesh is useless;*" our own power is useless in the struggle against evil in the world. Only by abiding in Jesus do we have the Spirit who gives life to our flesh, helping us in the cosmic struggle with evil.

Yet we are so darned fickle. As human beings we continue to look everywhere for a savior. We look to politics and ideologies, only to learn that they certainly don't lead to eternal life, nor will they abide in us eternally. We use our time and energy struggling and fighting with one another

rather than helping one another. We are so driven by fear of the Other that we no longer are able to see Christ in our neighbor.

The cosmic struggle that Paul writes about is right here in the human heart – in each of us. This is why many of Jesus’ disciples fell away, *“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”* Sin, like a virus, resists our efforts to heal ourselves. We are in the midst of a pandemic and we don’t recognize that we already have a preexisting condition called “sin” that it divides our families, homes, communities, our nation and our globe.

We will not get out of this pandemic without the abiding presence of Jesus. We will not get out of this global emergency without care and concern for others, rather than only for ourselves. No matter how we try to conceal it, fear drives our preoccupation with ourselves. We are often concerned about our rights rather than protecting the rights of our neighbor. Even masks and vaccinations have become a battleground about rights. We have become set upon our own individual freedoms rather than upon protecting the freedom, health and welfare of our neighbors and the society in which we live. Jesus comes to heal us so that we can live for others, our neighbors and the world.

Jesus offers us the bread of eternal life so that he might abide in us and help us. As Jesus abides in us, we are freed from fear to abide in and serve our neighbor. As Jesus abides in us, we are strengthened to struggle against the cosmic evil in this world.

In the sending hymn today (“Give to Our God Immortal Praise” ELW 848), we will sing the words, “He sent his Son with pow’r to save from guilt and darkness and the grave. Wonders of grace to God belong; repeat his mercies in your song.” Jesus was born of Mary, sharing our humanity to save us from “guilt and darkness and the grave,” so that we might become light in the darkness, working to save our neighbor’s life from darkness and the grave.

Jesus, the bread of heaven, frees us from the guilt of sin and restores our humanity so that truly free, we might exercise “the freedom of a Christian,” living for and serving our neighbor.

*“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* Abide in me Lord, that my life might make a difference in this world. Amen.