

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost B 18 August 2024

John 6:51-58

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*[Jesus says], Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day. Let's pray:*

Those of you who've ever been bushwalking, know that it's crucial to eat and drink regularly, even if you don't have an appetite or feel thirsty. A lack of energy can lead to accidents through poor judgement, and dehydration can lead to distress and disorientation. It's very easy to get lost in the bush if you don't keep your wits about you. Eating and drinking are important to our health.

But it's not just bushwalking in the Adelaide Hills, rambling across the Yorkshire Dales, or hiking through the Black Forest that reminds us of the importance of eating and drinking (although, I do highly recommend the apple strudel in the Black Forest). Eating and drinking is of paramount importance to our spiritual health as well as our physical. This Sunday's gospel reading marks the highlight and centre of St John's Eucharistic theology. Jesus says, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ...Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ... the one who eats this bread will live forever' (John 6:53,56,58).

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum and declares that it's through eating and drinking, through the Lord's Supper, that our sins are forgiven and we're reconciled with God. Christ dwells with and within us as we share his Body and Blood. We find the prototype for this teaching in the Old Testament: the manna sent each morning (wilderness of Sin; Exodus 16) and the water from the rock (Massah and Meribah; Exodus 17).

This eating and drinking sustained the Hebrews through forty years of wandering in the wilderness. They had food and drink for their journey but then their life's journey came to an end. We have drink and food for our journey that doesn't end. By eating and drinking in faith, Christ lives in us. Christ is with us until we are with him in eternal life. The little wafer of bread and sip of wine; the real Body and Blood of Jesus, sustain us and give us a foretaste of the great heavenly banquet to come.

We need the bread of life because we get hungry on our way through life. We know that we're saved by faith in Christ; by God's grace through faith. And we know that salvation is both now and yet to come. In Acts we read, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" [16:31]. This is called the "now" of salvation. When Christ died on the cross and rose again, our salvation was accomplished. By believing in him we have forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. But our daily life doesn't seem much like heaven. The ancient Israelites knew they were bound for the Promised Land; but in the meantime, spent forty years in the desert being bitten by poisonous serpents, thirsting for fresh water, and hungering for the flesh pots of Egypt. We too have God's promise of fullness of life but not the entire fulfillment, yet. As St Paul reminds us in Romans, we await "the redemption of our bodies" [8:23]; and in First Corinthians, "For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality" [15:53]. We look forward to the day when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and pain and suffering and death will be no more (Revelation 21:4). This is what's called the "but not yet" of salvation. For now, we have the Body and Blood of Christ given for us to eat and drink in faith.

An analogy that might help you is a pregnant mother waiting to give birth. St Paul uses this imagery when he describes our creation as "groaning in labour pains until now" (Romans 8:22). Imagine an eight months pregnant mother on the telephone with an old friend who'd heard the news of her pregnancy but didn't know when the baby was due. The friend might ask, "Do you have your baby yet?" To which the mother would undoubtedly be thinking, "Of course I've got my baby. I'm reminded every time the dear little one decides to kick to get my attention." But at the same time, the expectant mother doesn't yet

have her baby. To remain eight months pregnant indefinitely would be torment. So, she waits for the day which finally comes with pain and tears. The mother's body is transformed and everything changes. Crying gives way to laughter, cursing give way to joy, the groaning gives way to life. A pregnant mother is already a mother.

Likewise, we are saved now, and I want you to hear, know, understand, and internalise that. We are saved now! We have the promise that God is with us on our journey giving us strength for each new day and will finally bring to completion all that he has promised. We are given food and drink to sustain us, the great gift of the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, Christ's Body and Blood. And this food is real. Sadly, many choose to spiritualise the teaching of today's Gospel, and miss the true joy and revelation of Christ's real presence with them.

If we consider the plain sense of the words, we have physical eating and drinking. The words might make us uncomfortable as they did to Jesus' hearers. The words sounded like cannibalism, as the early Christians were charged by the Roman authorities. The concept of eating the body of Jesus and drinking the blood of Jesus has continued to offend many Christians through the centuries. Many want to spiritualise the teaching of Jesus, to turn it into a memorial of the Last Supper, or teach that Jesus doesn't really come to us through the means of bread and wine, but rather the human spirit ascends somehow to heaven to be with Jesus there.

That's a real sticking point for many Christians. We believe that God came to be among us, clothed in human flesh. All of the exalted attributes of God were present in the humble man, Jesus of Nazareth. This same Jesus, divine and human together, comes to us in, with, and under bread and wine to give us his Body and Blood. Some pastors give communion with the words, "This is the true Body of Christ; this is the true Blood of Christ."

The real presence of Christ in the sacrament was so important to Martin Luther and his followers that the Protestant movement was split over the issue. In 1529 at Marburg, Germany, all of the major reformers met: Luther, Melancthon, Bucer, Zwingli and the young John Calvin, to see if they could form a unified Protestantism. It was the only time the Reformers came together. The meetings were tense but agreement seemed possible until it got to the Lord's Supper. Famously, Martin Luther wrote in the dust of the table, *Hoc est Corpus Meum*, "This is My Body". When his opponents accused him of being a spiritless flesh-eater, Luther accused them of false spirituality and the churches divided.

Do we really eat Christ's Body and drink his Blood? Is it only symbolic? Are the words in our Gospel text a metaphor or literally true? Is Christ really present or really absent? The answer, I believe, lies in another question: If human flesh can contain the full divinity of God in Christ, then why can't bread and wine contain the real and true Body and Blood of Christ? My personal view, strong conviction, and teaching of our Church, is formed by Luther's plain reading of the scriptures. "Is" means "is". 'This *is* my body' (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24), and 'This *is* my blood' (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25) [See also John 6:22-58].

Dear Christians, we're not saved by squabbling over nuances in our sacramental theology; rather, we are fed by the sacrament and receive forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation by believing in the words, "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sin." We're called to believe and eat and drink and be forgiven, comforted, sustained, and strengthened in faith. This food is greater than the manna from heaven or the water from the rock. The Israelites ate and drank and died. We eat the flesh of Jesus and drink his blood and abide in him and he in us. We eat and drink eternal food for eternal life. We will never die; we will live with Jesus forever. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.