

Pentecost 12B 15 August 2021
John 6:51-58
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

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

I am the living bread that came down from heaven... 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:

I'm not being over-dramatic when I say that our beloved Lutheran Church is facing an existential crisis. If you ever attend a synod of our church, everyone you talk to will share with you their concerns, feelings, and opinions about the Lutheran Church. You can read a variety of judgements and forecasts about the Lutheran Church in various articles, blogs, and other social media. In doing so, you will get the distinct impression that we are rapidly approaching the last day.

For some, it's the last day they feel they can be a part of the Lutheran Church and they have either left or are leaving the church. Others may not leave the church but still feel it's the last day of the church they have known and loved. Some hope it's the last day that the church will militate against the ordination of women, while others express that that will only happen over their dead body.

Come what may, it doesn't really matter which "side" you're on because the reality is that since Jesus first spoke those words, the last day has always been imminent. But the last day is not limited to the state of the church. We all come to the last day – the last day of physical life, the last day of a relationship, the last day of a dream for what life might have been and what we wanted. And some days the grind of daily living become so heavy and overwhelming that we declare, "Enough is enough! It can't go on like this." These are all expressions of the last day. Another way I've heard it coined locally is, "The mind boggles" (Hill, P.: 2017-2021+?).

Our main problem is that we think of the last day as some calamitous time in the future to be avoided. We fear it as a day of future endings, failures, and losses. And yet the reality is that every day is the last day. There's no guarantee of tomorrow. We don't know what tomorrow will bring or if there'll even be a tomorrow. What we've been given is this present moment. So, today is the last day. But it's not a day to fear or avoid. It's a glorious day full of grace, hope, beauty, and life. And that's a guarantee underwritten by God himself.

“And I will raise them up on the last day,” Jesus promises.

Every day is the last day. That's not just good news; that's great news because every day we're being raised up. Every day we're being renewed. Every day we're being re-created. Every day we're being given new life and new possibilities. Every single day we're being raised up into the likeness of Christ. That's why we show up Sunday after Sunday. We want to be raised up. We want our deepest longing fulfilled. We want to find meaning and purpose for our lives. Surely, that's something worth celebrating.

So today – this last day – is a day to celebrate and give thanks. And what better way than in the Lord's Supper, where God takes simple earthly elements - bread and wine, blesses them, and offers to us the body and blood of Christ to eat and drink. In this mystery we call Holy Communion, God transforms the last day into the new and eternal first day.

But how, we ask? How can we celebrate and eat and drink together when there's so much division, hurt, anger, and fear in our church? How can we celebrate when we know the reality of the brokenness, losses, and sorrows of our lives? How can we celebrate when the news headlines say there's nothing to celebrate; when the end of the world is nigh?

The religious authorities of Jesus' day also have their questions. They too want answers. They disagree and fight. They argue among themselves sneering mockingly, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” They want to be right. We want to be right.

But Jesus doesn't answer the question. Why? Because our need to be right, our craving for certainty, must take back seat to what Jesus knows we really need. Jesus ignores the question and, instead, responds to our deepest need. What we most long for today, this last day, is life. That's what Jesus offers. Jesus isn't concerned with correct answers and right explanations. Connection with him is what transforms the world and our lives. Jesus prioritises life, connection, relationship.

Jesus doesn't need to explain how he can give his flesh to be eaten. Instead, he invites us to taste and see, to eat and drink. He's like a loving parent gently coaxing their child to try new food, "Just try it. It's good for you." Jesus invites us into a relationship of intimacy with him and each other, to come together and partake of the one body and the one blood. "Just try it. It's good for you."

Jesus knows that we who eat his flesh and drink his blood live and remain in him and he in us. He speaks in the present tense. It's not about the future. It's about right now, right here, in this place, in your life, and in my life... Now, it's Jesus' turn to ask a question.

Are we willing to risk being united, to eat his flesh and drink his blood, to be made one body and one blood? If we say yes, we're asking to be changed, to be made different. And God is always faithful. God will change us. We will be different. Our last day will be transformed into the new first day – the eternal day – the day in which we are raised up into the likeness of Christ. Our last day will be changed into the first day full of new possibilities, new relationships, and new life.

The brokenness of the world will never be healed by doctrine, argument, schism, or certainty. Maybe it's not important to eliminate our differences. Maybe the goal is to be united because of our differences. Because without each other we're incomplete. If even one person leaves this parish, we're less than we're called to be. If one parish leaves this district all other parishes are impoverished. And if one district were to leave the Lutheran Church, the Body of Christ would be wounded. The body and blood of Jesus; the Lord's Supper, completes us. It gathers us with all of our differences and unites us into one, holy communion. It heals and restores us. It makes us holy.

When we participate in the Lord's Supper, we literally take into our bodies and our souls, the fullness of Jesus. We digest his humanity and it becomes a part of us. We digest his divinity and it becomes a part of us. "You are what you eat" was the gist of God's word for us two weeks ago. When we eat the body of Christ and drink his blood, he draws us together into a unified whole. We are the one Body of Christ in the world. And there's nothing that can separate us from each other or from God.

Today, on this last day, we again join with Christians across all times and all places in celebrating the Lord's Supper just as God's people have done for two millennia. God will again consecrate his offering of bread and wine and we will be raised up. Look at the bread. Look at the wine. "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). And live!

Jesus offers the Jews life and they stand there arguing among themselves about who is right and who is wrong. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" But what I want to know is this. Will we refuse to eat and drink his offering of life? Will we refuse to be raised up? Will we sit here and say, "No, thanks, I'd rather die?"

Dear Beloved Saints, Body of Christ, Church; we are the hands and feet of Jesus in a hungry and thirsty world. We are the unified Body of Christ; a living refuge of hope for the pain and brokenness of the world. We are God's sacrament, holy food for a starving world. And we will live! drinking in our Lord's grace, faith, mercy, love, and forgiveness, and we will be raised up each last day to new and everlasting life. Amen.

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