

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2024

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Ephesians 5:6-21

John 6:51-69

Last Sunday there was a marvelous confluence of two beloved phrases. It happened at this altar. The union of these two basic truths made them shine with great beauty, poetic beauty. It was toward the end of the distribution. As is our custom, the congregation was singing robustly, joyfully. I welcomed a new group of congregants to the table, some of whom can't kneel because of joint issues. Oh, they could kneel; they just couldn't get back up. Again, as is characteristic of our beloved congregation, the communicants were delighted to be at Christ's altar. There's a sense of joy that permeates the blessed sacrament at Christ the King Lutheran Church. This sense of joy is truly one of our distinguishing traits, a trait that is shared all across this globe. The theological rhythm between the final distribution hymn and the pastor giving the faithful Christ's body unfolded like this, the congregation singing and me speaking: Jesus loves me (the body of Christ) this I know (the body of Christ) for the Bible (the body of Christ) tells me so (the body of Christ) little ones to Him belong (the body of Christ) they are weak but He is strong (the body of Christ). Yes, Jesus loves me (the body of Christ). Yes, Jesus loves me (the body of Christ). Yes, Jesus loves me (the body of Christ). The Bible tells me so (the body of Christ).

Why does Jesus give us His body to eat and His blood to drink? I could answer that 10 different ways without breaking a theological sweat. The principal reason – because He loves us. As I've said before, a pastor sees things that not everyone sees. This is just a small sampling of what I saw this week. I saw a 93-year-old widower who wept as he referenced the "sins of his youth." I communed him – the body of Christ given for you. I visited a woman who was completely disconnected from reality but alert and responsive when it came to the sacrament – the body of Christ given for you. I chatted with folks who have faced dysfunction, a lack of support in a place where one should never face dysfunction – the body of Christ given for you. Two of our beloved saints have undergone cancer surgeries and are on the precipice of chemo therapy – the body of Christ given for you. Seven men sat around and talked about courage and the Last Days. Each of us wondered if we would be strong in the face of great calamity, great adversity, great darkness – the body of Christ given for you. Why does Jesus give us His body to eat and His blood to drink?

The Lord shows no hesitation in pushing the full implications of His teaching. "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" (John 6:51). This conversation is going sideways and Jesus lets it go sideways. The Lord Christ is not one to backpedal. Why do you suppose that is? Listen to how the people Jesus is speaking to respond: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52). They refuse to even use Jesus' name. *This man* – it's a pejorative. It's a contemptuous put-down – *this man*. The question that is asked has an implied answer. How can this man give us his flesh to eat? The implied answer – He can't. What's the problem here? Is this simply a crowd of rank antagonists? Is this just a crowd of scribes and Pharisees and teachers of the law? John tells us that is *not* the case. "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it'" (John 6:60). *Disciples!*

John doesn't use that word lightly. At the end of this episode St. John tells us something remarkable. "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him" (John 6:66).

What I'm about to say is not subterfuge. What I'm about to say isn't some Lutheran pastor dude trying to score cheap points with clever sophistry or theological sleight of hand. What I'm about to say is patently obvious – which is my "go-to" because I'm not all that smart. Jesus spends a lot of time talking about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. This kind of talk hacks off plenty of those listening, even some of His disciples; so much so that they bail on Him. **And Jesus lets them go.** If Jesus were speaking metaphorically, that is if it were a mere metaphor that chapped their hide then the Lord would clarify in order not to scandalize those He is seeking (Isaiah 42:3). But He lets them go because eating His flesh and drinking His blood is *not* a metaphor. In the very next breath, John tells us that Jesus turned to the twelve and basically held the door open for them if they wanted to hit the exit. "Do you want to go away as well?" (John 6:67). Simon Peter, who's heard all of this teaching, surveys the landscape and says something that ought to be seared into your head: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

Does that sound like Peter is settling? Does Simon Peter sound like Eeyore? Oh, well, gee, I guess we'll stay. Maybe things will get better once you refine your message. No; Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Peter's ready to stand up and be counted. Go? Where are we going to go? No one else has words like yours! Eternal life is in your teaching, your Word, your very person. If You tell us that You are the bread of life, we believe it. Here are three Bible passages to string together. This first one explains those who left. "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer" (2 Corinthians 5:16). This next one makes you wiser. "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5 NIV). This last one puts a sacramental bow on the whole dispute in John 6. "But Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible'" (Matthew 19:26).

Why does Jesus do this? Why does the Lord of life give you His body to eat and His blood to drink? It's the same reason that the Word became flesh. It is the same reason that He set His face toward Jerusalem and the radical abuse of Golgotha. He loves you. You are His sheep. He loves you. It was only Christ and His holiness, only Christ and His power who could atone for your sins. He did it because He loves you. You are the handiwork of God's creative desire and leaving you to the cruelty of the enemy, leaving you to the poverty of sin, leaving you riddled in death is not something that God could do. The Messiah's blood is spilled because you can't be saved in any other way than for Jesus, true God and true man, to pay the price. His blood is the price. What a sacrifice! It extends to the ends of the earth. It has no boundary of time or location. And it is given to you in His body and His blood. The highest act of faith is to receive what God wills to give. He wants to give you His body to eat. Love moves Him to give you His blood to drink. He is life. We are not life. We receive His life. This life is outside of us, but by His operation it becomes in us.

Christ's life in us; in the midst of all of our turmoil, in the midst of all of our chaos and dysfunction and calamitous mistakes, our Lord wills that His life should be in us. Because He loves us. Because He knows what we need. Because life is more than this temporal shadow-land. "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:54). Yours is an elevated life. Faith gives you a new life, a new purpose, a new hope. You are a reflection of the King of kings. Goodness is your vocation. Truth is your mantle. Sacrifice is the air in your lungs. You are a Christian. You are fed by Christ and you serve Him. You have known great love – by way of the Word and Sacrament you have known Christ's love. Jesus loves me (the body of Christ) this I know (the body of Christ) for the bible (the body of Christ) tells me so (the body of Christ). "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" (John 6:51). Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.