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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 15, Series B (Pentecost 12)
Saturday, August 14th, 2021
Sunday, August 15th, 2021

Sermon: Hard Sayings
Texts: John 6:51-69

Focus: Jesus' words are Spirit and Life.

Function: That they would believe Christ's Word, no matter how strange or offensive.

Structure: Story-Interrupted

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, Explanation of the Third Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel lesson is the third and final part of Jesus' so-called Bread of Life Discourse, that is, the teaching he gave the very next day after the miraculous feeding of more than five-thousand people. We've been listening to Jesus' Bread of Life sermon for the past three weeks now. Today is the day that Jesus hits his stride and really drives the message home. And today is the day that Jesus' words also drive away many of his one-time disciples.

"This is a hard saying," they complain—a difficult word. "Who can listen to it?" (John 6:60, ESV).¹ And by the end of their exchange, we are told, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him" (v. 66).

The Bread of Life Discourse is ripped straight from the pages of How Not to Grow Your Church. Unlike much (but not all) of the Church Growth Movement, which since the 1980's has urged churches to focus on programming, marketing, and strategy in order to add new members, Jesus' words in John 6 do the opposite. Instead of growing, Jesus' nascent movement shrinks.

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Instead of adding new people, he drives them away. From the human viewpoint of goals and metrics, Jesus is a complete and utter failure. There is nothing shiny or successful about the Jesus movement in John 6.

What did Jesus say that so offended people? It all began in two weeks ago, when Jesus called himself “the bread of life... come down from heaven...” (vv. 35-38). Even as cryptic as his words initially may appear, they are clearly a strong claim for a Jewish carpenter from the backwater town of Nazareth in the redneck region of Galilee. Jesus did not even train under a respected rabbi, yet he aspired to call himself Teacher.

“So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They said, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, “I have come down from heaven?”’” (John 6:41-42).

Jesus’ words confused and confounded them.

But then he made it worse. He made his description of bread even more explicit: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. For the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (v. 51). This assertion was even more problematic, because Jesus claimed that his flesh possessed the power to grant eternal life. What’s more, his words seemed to border on cannibalism, which was a despicable custom only practiced by some pagans. Cannibalism was especially offensive to the Jews, who were forbidden by the Law of Moses to eat *any* kind of meat with blood in it (cf. Gen. 9:4; Lev. 7:26; etc.).

So, John tells us, “the Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (v. 52). It was a question not merely of logistics, but also of authority and ethics. This question sounds an awful lot like the one our Reformed, Baptist, and non-

denominational friends ask us, the same question Luther asks in the Small Catechism: “How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?” (SC). To which Luther replies:

“Certainly not just eating and drinking do these great things, but the words written here: ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.’ These words, along with the bodily eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament. Whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: ‘forgiveness of sins.’” (SC).

The bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper are not magic. But the Word of God has the power to create the reality it speaks, as when God spoke at creation, “Let there be light,” and there was light! Jesus says, “This is my Body,” and his Word makes it so. Jesus says, “This is my Blood,” and blood it becomes.

Now for those of us hearing Jesus’ Bread of Life sermon *after* the events of Holy Week, it is not difficult for us to understand that Jesus’ words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood refer to the Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion, in which we receive Jesus’ Body and Blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus did not endorse cannibalism or vampirism. The bread and wine in Holy Communion are his Body and Blood. Jesus says, “Take eat; this is my body” (Matt. 26:26). And “this is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 28). That Jesus speaks of a sacramental eating and not outright cannibalism is readily apparent to us—but not so to his first Jewish audience.

Yet rather than explain this and smooth things over in order to appease his audience, Jesus just adds fuel to the fire and makes it even *more* disgusting by even more graphic imagery:

“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. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink” (John 6:53-55).

Notice the shift in language: Jesus first spoke about *eating* his flesh; now he speaks of *feeding* upon it. The Greek word (*trogein*) has the idea of chewing or chomping on something. In other words, Jesus says, “Y’all need to *munch* on me!” How bizarre! Perhaps we should not be surprised that Jesus’ hearers were scandalized by his words.

Nearly 500 years ago, at Marburg, Martin Luther scandalized the Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, in their discussions regarding the Lord’s Supper. Zwingli insisted that because Christ has ascended into heaven, there is no conceivable way that the bread and wine can be united with Jesus’ Body and Blood. Therefore, the Lord’s Supper is, in Zwingli’s view, merely a symbol or *representation* of Jesus’ body and blood.

Luther would have none of these linguistic gymnastics and famously wrote in a large hand on the table: “This is my body.” Indeed, Luther himself resorted to language similar to Christ’s “munching,” when he later wrote: “Whoever eats this bread eats Christ’s body, and whoever presses this bread with teeth or tongue presses the body of Christ with teeth or tongue.”²

Luther and Zwingli never came to an agreement. And to this day, many Protestants regard the Lutherans as a kind of “Catholic lite,” because we dare take Jesus at his literal Word. “Is” means *is*, we say. If Jesus says, “This is my body” and “This is my blood,” then who am I to question or second guess my Lord? No, I will take him at his Word. Nevertheless, our Lutheran understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar is almost as revolting to other Christians today as were Jesus’ words to the Jews of his own day.

All of this was too much for people to take. “This is a hard saying,” they said. “Who can listen to it” (John 6:60). And then they went away. “Many of his disciples turned back and no

² Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House,), §2474.

longer walked with him” (v. 66). They abandoned Jesus. They fell away from faith. They became apostate.

The same thing happens in the Christian Church today, including our own congregation. In addition to the Lord’s Supper, there are many other teachings of our faith that people find hard to swallow (pun intended). Some leave because they come to reject the Lutheran practice of infant baptism. Others cannot stand for our teaching on young earth, six-day creation (as opposed to theistic or Darwinian evolution). Others are offended by our pro-life stance against abortion and euthanasia or our refusal to approve of same-sex relationships. The Lutheran Church does not submit to the ever-changing *Zeitgeist*, or “spirit of the age.”

When we encounter something in Scripture with which we disagree, we must change, not the Scripture. The Bible will not change. The Word of the Lord endures forever (Isa. 40:8; cp. 1 Pet. 1:25). We dare not take license to cut and paste which parts of the Bible we want to believe, and which we will reject, as many of the liberal Protestant churches do.

But many people refuse to repent and believe the Word of God. They prefer to go with the flow—or go it alone. St. Paul prophesied:

“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Man is a mythmaker, and whether those myths are religious, philosophical, political, or scientific, they are all destructive. Tragically, even many who grow up in Christian churches turn away every day to wander off into these myths.

Most of Jesus’ disciples went away after the Bread of Life Discourse. It’s not what their itching ears wanted to hear. It was a “hard saying,” a difficult teaching—altogether too much!

So in sadness, Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked them, “Do you want to go away as well?” (John 6:67). Are you guys also offended by my teaching? Have you also had more than enough fill of my words?

To which Simon Peter, ever the spokesmen for the apostles, replied, “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).

Nearly every Sunday we sing Peter’s words in our Gospel acclamation:



Only Jesus has the words of eternal life. Only Jesus’ Word *gives* life. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh who is himself the Way, the Truth, and the *Life* (John 1:1, 14; 14:6).

No other person, organization, or media outlet can speak words that give life. Not CNN, Fox News, Q-Anon, Facebook, or Twitter. Not even I, your dear pastor, can offer the words of eternal life unless I speak only those words that God has given me in Holy Writ. That is why pastors and the people of God must bind ourselves to the Bible, to the Word of God, the living Word that brings life.

Jesus is the living bread come down from heaven to give his flesh for the life of the world (John 6:51). He gave us his flesh when he offered up his body on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. And he gives us his flesh when we crunch his body and slurp his blood in the Lord’s

Supper. Jesus promises that whoever eats of his flesh and drinks of his blood will have eternal life, and he will raise us up on the Last Day.

This may be a hard teaching, but it is true. Christ alone has the words of eternal life. Do not turn away. And do not go to anyone else. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.