

Pastor Joe Polzin
John 6:51-69
“Words of Eternal Life”
Year B – Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 19, 2018

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

Today’s Gospel brings us to the end of John chapter 6, where Jesus teaches us that He is the Bread of Life from heaven. And as we come to the end of this chapter, we see that our attitude toward Jesus as the Bread of Life depends entirely on just who Jesus is. Is He God in the Flesh come to offer Himself up for our sins, or is He just a regular guy, who lived and taught people in Galilee?

The answer to this one question determines how we think about all He’s said in this chapter, which we’ve heard the past few weeks in church. If Jesus, the Bread of Life, is the Holy One of God, then this chapter is a beautiful depiction of His plan to save mankind from sin. But if Jesus is merely a man, then this chapter about bread and drink, body and blood is confusing at best, and offensive at worst.

Since today’s Gospel is part of a continuous discourse that started two weeks ago, we need to be sure we remember some of what Jesus has been saying to get to this point. Previously, Jesus had explained what He meant when He speaks of eating and drinking. *Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst (6:35).* This verse is important because it helps us understand that when Jesus is talking about eating and drinking, He is talking about coming to Him and believing in Him.

Of course, believing in Jesus means believing that He saves us from sin and gives us eternal life. It means believing that He is not only the man who preached in the synagogue in Capernaum, but that He is also God and Savior. The God and Savior who gives of Himself to save the world. And our Gospel today began with these words: *“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.”*

The Jews were utterly confused. “How can this man gives us his flesh to eat?” Jesus continued: *“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. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”* Three times here Jesus talks about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. In addition, He re-iterates that His flesh is food and His blood is drink. He also equates this eating and drinking to receiving eternal life.

For us today, our minds probably can’t help but jump to Holy Communion. But before we go there, think about how the crowds that day would have heard these words. Holy Communion hadn’t been instituted yet. So what was Jesus indicating to them?

Well, these words point forward to something, something that hadn’t been seen yet by the people. These words begin to unveil the price Jesus knew He was going to pay in order to secure salvation for us. Jesus knew that He would offer up His body, His flesh, on the cross for the

forgiveness of sins. When He speaks of eating His flesh, He is telling the synagogue crowd that He will sacrifice His body for them and they are to partake of that sacrifice by believing in Him.

In a similar way, Jesus knew that He would shed His blood for the forgiveness of sins. When He speaks of drinking His blood, He is telling the synagogue crowd that He will shed His blood for them and they are to partake of that sacrifice by believing in Him. Eating His flesh and drinking His blood both point forward to the same thing, the moment when Jesus will be lifted up on the cross. And those who look to that sign and believe will receive the benefits of that sacrifice: resurrection into eternal life on the Last Day.

Of course, for the early Christian Church, and for us still today, when we hear Jesus speak of body and blood, we can't help but think of the Sacrament of the Altar. Where we receive the very body and blood of Jesus given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sin. This is an appropriate connection to make. But we also remember that Communion was instituted by Jesus the day before his death on the cross. So the Holy Supper of bread and wine, body and blood, is always in light of what happened the next day, when Jesus offered his body and blood for our sins on the cross.

These words of Jesus in John chapter 6, though they may have been hard for the Jews to understand at the time, are very gracious. He is promising salvation to all who believe in Him. He states that He will procure salvation by sacrificing His body and shedding His blood. He says that this salvation is for the entire world. And so the fundamental question that had to have been the minds of those who heard Him that day was, "Can this guy actually deliver on his promise?"

The ability to pull all this off depends on who Jesus is. Suppose Jesus was only a man and nothing more. Even if Jesus somehow managed to live a perfect life and die an innocent, sacrificial death – even then, the most He could do is save Himself. But given the sinful state of man at birth, even this saving of self would be impossible. No human can save himself from sin. Jesus must be more than a man if His words are to have any truth. In order for Jesus to keep these words, He must be both God and man.

Which would have been a radical claim, and still is. It's not something humans expect in our rational world. That is why Jesus said that no one can come to Him unless it is granted by the Father. We cannot accept Jesus' claims without being given faith by the Father. Although God does not explain why some people today reject Jesus, we should not be surprised when they do. Some people rejected Jesus even when He was standing in front of them, speaking directly to them.

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" His disciples, not only the 12, but the larger group that regularly followed Him, also said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" Finally, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. They rejected Jesus, they rejected His message, and they rejected His salvation.

Paul describes this situation well when He says in 1 Corinthians, *Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles* (1:22-23). The body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins were a stumbling block to those who rejected Jesus, and are still stumbling blocks for many today.

Many religions claim that their god is powerful, knowledgeable, immortal, transcendent, and so forth. And while the true God is all of these things, He reveals his true nature when He takes on mortal flesh and sheds His blood on the cross for us. This is who our God is.

Nevertheless, there are many who claim to be Christians who are ashamed of the cross. There are even some churches that refuse to display a cross because it might offend someone.

There are many churches that don't talk about sin, and therefore don't talk about forgiveness, because that's a message, they think, far too cynical, far too depressing, far too power-less.

Much more appealing is to talk about the power or the success or the wealth God wants us to have, or so they say. And yet, it's clear. Jesus didn't come to make us happy, healthy, wealthy, and wise. Jesus came because we are sinners in need of forgiveness. And to be called a sinner is an offensive message. The cross offends a sinner because there had to be a payment of body and blood for sin. For your sin, and for mine. The core message of Christianity isn't to talk about how great we are for Christ. It's to talk about how great Christ is for us.

We praise God that not all who are given faith to believe reject it. *Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?"* And Simon Peter speaks up. And you've got to love Peter. He never seems to do things half way. When He is wrong, he is all wrong, but when he is right, his words are priceless. *"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."*

Peter confesses that Jesus and Jesus alone has the words of eternal life. There is nowhere else the Twelve can go. These words of eternal life are the words that God continues to use, the words we continue to hear, as we do again today. They are the words that the Holy Spirit uses to give faith to us. They are the words that the Holy Spirit uses to teach us that Jesus is both Lord and Christ, or as Peter says, that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

You know, it's important to note. In all four Gospels, Jesus is never more popular when He is doing signs and wonders for the people. But all four Gospels also depict the time when Jesus' followers became fewer and fewer. And it happens when Jesus begins to speak of the cross more and more clearly. And as Jesus did so, one by one people left Him. By the end, one of the Twelve betrays Him, and the rest scatters and abandons Him. Eventually, it was only Jesus alone, hanging on a cross, where even God the Father forsakes Him as Jesus embodied all our sin in utter loneliness.

But looking back, in a way, that's exactly the sign God wants us to see. And that's the sign Jesus was telling people about in John chapter 6. That the cross, and the body and blood given and shed there, wasn't chosen because it made Jesus popular, or because that's what we as rational human being would ever have chosen. Jesus offered himself there because it's what we needed. For the forgiveness of our sins, and for eternal life. Therefore we believe, and have come to know, that Jesus on the cross is the Holy One of God. In his name. Amen.

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