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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, August 19, 2018
13th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 20/Proper 15/Year B

Primary Text: John 6:51-58

Sermon Title: “*The One Who Eats this Bread will Live Forever*”

Theme

In John’s gospel, the feeding of the five thousand leads to extended teaching in which Jesus identifies himself as the true “bread of life.” Finally, in these verses, he makes a connection that would not be understood until after his death, in light of the church’s celebration of holy communion.

Text

[Jesus said,] ⁵¹“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³So Jesus said to them, “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. ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

Sermon

As I mentioned last week, this *bread cycle* which we are following from John chapter 6, began on July 29 with the sign, commonly called "the Miracle of the Feeding of the Five-thousand" at which Jesus did indeed miraculously feed all those people who came out to hear him preach and teach.

But while Jesus intended that miracle to be a sign of who he is, and therefore lead them to God and godly living according to his own example, most missed it. And as you know, some followed him the next day to get some more of his free bread. But Jesus saw through them and their motivations and told them they had missed the point the day before when he fed them. He told them:

²⁷"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

From there Jesus went on through verse 59. Fifty-nine verses in other words, describing himself and his role as the

- ²⁷Son of Man,
- ²⁷ the one on whom God has set his seal,
- ²⁹ the one who God has sent
- ⁴⁰ the Son of the Father

And he did that by using the metaphor of bread. He called himself:

- ³²true bread from heaven
- ³³Bread of God
- ³⁵Bread of Life
- ⁵¹Living Bread come down from Heaven
- Wonder Bread
- The best thing since sliced bread

OK, I made the last two up, but you get the point. You should hear some of the virulent responses the lectionary editors get every third year when this cycle comes up. How many ways can we slice it, Jesus? (Pun intended)

And let us not forget that this conversation between Jesus and those hungry followers was a bit hostile – they were hangry! And maybe that is the reason they were not able to pick up what he put down. He said crazy things! He obviously isn't bread.

And so they said,

⁴²"Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

And in that way that he always had, he saw an attitude in them and responded by saying,

⁴³"Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.

You see, Jesus was trying to tell them that it is simply not possible for one to come to an understanding about what he was saying apart from the gift of faith from God.

In a moment we will get into the gory details of Jesus' claims in today's Gospel Reading, but you can get a hint of where this sermon is going from the First Reading where Solomon wrote:

Proverbs 9:4" **You that are simple, turn in here!"**
To those without sense she (wisdom) says,
⁵"Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Now, it is not polite in our society to call another "simple" or to say about one, "they have no sense" but this passage from Proverbs seems to be lifting up *being simple* and *without sense* as a virtue and exactly what we need to be people of faith. We'll come back to this in a moment.

Now, come with me into today's Gospel Reading, you that are simple and have no sense.

In the Gospel Reading for today, Jesus upped his game by making the most outlandish statements of this outlandish passage to date. He said,

- ⁵¹"the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh"
- ⁵³unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.
- ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life
- ⁵⁵my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink
- ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them
- ⁵⁷whoever eats me will live

I can think of only two reasons I can get away with reading such outlandish claims in church without having to hand out barf bags.

- 1) If you are a long time Christian or even a sporadic worship attender, then you are used to hearing these words in church. They have lost their gag factor for us.
- 2) As Jesus said, through the gift of God, which in the post-Resurrection period we would call the gift of the Holy Spirit, we understand Jesus was using metaphor to explain the significance of himself – his ministry of preaching and teaching and performing signs and miracles, and his life's example. He says he is as necessary to our spiritual lives as bread, basic nourishment, is to our physical lives.

So, let me attempt to say what I am saying again, another way. When Jesus made these outlandish statements, he was really saying that he, Jesus, is of critical importance in the lives of believers. Like that of basic sustenance to the body. He himself, his example and his teachings are what the godly person needs to live well here and now both physically and spiritually. And if we do that now, we will also be prepared for eternal life, or whatever comes next.

Now I realize that it is difficult for us to put ourselves in their sandals, but I assure you, the people that were in dialogue with him that day had never heard anything like that. Eternal life was not a commonly held idea. And even though they had just participated in one of the greatest miracles of the New Testament, he still looked like a man. And the stuff he was saying just sounded crazy to them.

And here is where I would like to go back to the reading from Proverbs. In order for any of this faith stuff to make sense, you need to be simple and have no-sense. That's right, I just said that.

Faith is not attained by having all the answers to questions that require faith. The best science and exploration cannot answer questions that come up in discussions about the Christian faith.

You may have had discussions with people before about your faith and it may have gone something like this; "I cannot believe that you believe in a supreme being that created everything. I mean, evolution is just good science. And I can't believe that you believe that one guy 2000 years ago came down from heaven as God's son and then volunteered to be killed by crucifixion. And that his death somehow nullifies all the world's sin. And that there is a place called heaven that you will go to when you die. I mean, come on dude. What are you? Simple? Have you no-sense?"

Ever happened to you? No wonder we are reticent to give our witness to another. We fear we will be judged to be the village idiot.

I want to tell you a true story about one of our members, Cindi Bishop. Cindi is the daughter of Patricia Clingensmith and I have permission to tell her story. We don't see Cindi often and I presume that is because she has a demanding job in the medical field as a manager at St. Elizabeth Hospital. So that should tell you that she is an educated person in the medical field.

Months ago she was had some health issues and was eventually diagnosed with endocrine cancer. As she told me, endocrine cancer is not curable although it is treatable. It will kill her, but it will take a long time. When I saw her just last April she had been undergoing chemo and other treatments that had really taken its toll on her. She was weak, out of breath and on oxygen, and had no appetite and the treatment made her susceptible to getting sick. She was pale and thin and had lost

her hair. After that April her entire body was infected with tumors – lungs, liver, lymph nodes, she even had bumps of skin cancer on the surface of her skin.

Her doctor here, who had been consulting with doctors at the Cleveland Clinic had come to the end of their treatment, and told her they had done all they could and it was time for her to go home and get her affairs in order.

Now I don't know Cindi that well, so I don't know if she is just stubborn or if she knew something. I know she was motivated to live for her family, including her two daughters, but she said that that was not going to be her outcome. She told me she prayed a lot and continued to network and felt led to another doctor at University Hospital. Though even a car ride to Cleveland was painful in those days, she saw a glass building and had sort of a vision or something that told her, she was going to be well again.

Well that doctor led her to another doctor at University, who was doing experimental research on endocrine cancer. And that doctor noticed that in some forms of endocrine cancer that one of the genes had an inverted chromosome and if he could just attack that one gene he might be able to put the cancer into remission.

Well, as it turned out, Cindi's cancer is exactly that type. The doctor immediately admitted her to the test without approval of her insurance. The doctor told her that if her body was to respond like he hoped she might feel improvement in about four weeks.

Cindi was feeling better in three days and has made steady progress ever since. And now the doctor is hopeful that her cancer will not just be put into remission but may simply disappear altogether.

I visited Cindi in her home last Thursday and I was not prepared for what I saw. She was up and had energy and color and her hair was growing in. She was not on oxygen and had an appetite most of the time. And her eyes sparkled as she told me her story. Was it a miracle? Was it a coincidence? Was it her own stubbornness?

It is entirely probable that if I over-intellectualize scripture almost any weekend, I might come away with the decision that this 'life of faith' stuff is not for me. You have to admit, the things that Jesus said in just today's reading is cra-cra!

Imagine being a first century Jew, which is who Jesus is talking to. His commands seem to indicate the practice of cannibalism – maybe we can understand why they were left confused.

But if we simply have faith, even when it makes no sense, we will receive comfort from a God who is with us through the Holy Spirit of the one who loved us enough that he was willing to die in our place.

On the night that those events were set in motion he said "This bread is my body and this wine is my blood. I want you to eat and drink so that you will be one with me and one with each other. Do this so that you never forget the love I have for you. And we will feast again, in the place I go to prepare for you, where the feast will never end."

And so we do as he commanded. We re-enact that meal, because we are simple enough to believe his non-sense. And because we believe him when he says, "The One Who Eats this Bread will Live Forever"

Will faith in Jesus make all our diagnosis come out like Cindi's? Of course not. Cindi is mortal and will die at some point. But come what may, God revealed in Jesus Christ has so much more to offer than this mortal life alone anyway. God still gives us signs and miracles, perhaps like Cindi's, to give us hope and faith – if we could just see it.

Next weekend is the exciting conclusion to this bread cycle, and I am already excited about the sermon, but that is next week.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

My challenge for you this week is to try to not over-intellectualize everything you see. Rather, observe that thing and wallow in the wonder and mystery of it, and smile, asking yourself if you have just seen God at work.

Prayer

Loving God of miracle feedings and healings, we give you thanks and praise for our very lives and all the moments therein. Send us your Spirit to guide us into the

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mystery that is you, so that we can worship and praise you and marvel at your power. That's all we ask. But we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen