

Sermon Proper 15 2018

August 19, 2018

John 6:51-69

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

Jesus speaks words that are hard to hear doesn't He? His disciples admit it. **When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"** A bunch of them are packing up and shipping out. Here they had hoped this was the Messiah, and now He's just talking crazy. Eating flesh? Drinking blood? What's that about? Is He calling for cannibals for followers? It sounds like it, doesn't it? If you don't eat this flesh, if you don't drink this blood you'll die. Just like those Israelites who ate of God's provided manna and still died, unless you move beyond the eating for the belly, you won't live. And what is that flesh? Jesus' flesh.

I said that about cannibals, that's what the people thought the early Christians were. They accused them of cannibalism. Here these odd Christians would get together and eat the body of Christ. They would eat the flesh of a man, the flesh of their God. Odd bunch they were. But what were they doing? They were just heeding the hard saying of Jesus, weren't they? **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."**

But as we hear Jesus saying this, as we hear the disciples responding, as we hear many of them leaving, what does Jesus say to those who are left? Think about this. Here had just fed the 5000 before this. Here had made it clear to them in the lesson we heard a couple of weeks ago that they weren't listening to Him because they believed in Him, they didn't get that He was this Bread of Life, that He was sent into the world to atone for the sins of mankind, for the sins of those people there, for your sins, for my sins, that we would live forever. They didn't get that. They didn't care about that. What did they want? They wanted food in their belly. And if I might take a second to think about that, I think we can be sympathetic if we take ourselves out of our context. The reality is that most of us here don't know what it is to be hungry. If we have truly been hungry at some time in our lives, whether voluntarily through fasting or involuntarily through other circumstances, the reality is that all of us probably know where our next meal is coming from. Think if we didn't. Think if you

didn't know how likely it was that you might eat again today. Think about if you didn't know when you might eat again. Some of those people would have been in that position. Thinking about that we can see why they might be interested in a king who would feed them. The truth is we have plenty of interest in that which will feed us, that will comfort us, that will clothe us. But in the midst of that Jesus pulls no punches. He calls them on it, and tells them that they're just there for bread.

Then in today's lesson, with all of these people gone, with thousands filing away, grumbling about this hard saying, with even some dedicated disciples sauntering off into the masses, what does Jesus say to the twelve? Does He do some tempering of His words? Does He equivocate? Does He give an explanation to the inner circle as He was apt to do? No, He doesn't, does He? He doesn't back off on this. He doesn't tell them about how He is speaking in a parable here that hearing those around might not hear, nor might they understand, but that the disciples get the inside track.

No, this time, He pushes them to the limit too. They're grumbling about this being a hard saying, and John tells that Jesus knows this **"in himself,"** and yet what does John tell us He says? He looks at them and says, **"Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."** As I say all of that, literally what Jesus says there is, "does this scandalize you?" "Are you scandalized by my words and preaching too?" "They've all walked away, are you packing your bags to leave as well?"

Isn't that confidence interesting? It's almost opposite of how we think in the Church today isn't it? So often in the Church today we focus on how we can make this Gospel message as palatable as possible. We focus on how we can make it as attractive as possible. We look at the millions packing up their bags and flooding out of the Church, and we call out after them, "Hey wait, look at how cool we can make ourselves look! We can play hip music, and we can tell you really great stories on a stage, and we can give you really practical advice on how to live your life. We can even tell you how God wants to give you a better life now!" But is that what Jesus does here? It's not is it?

Now to be fair, as the Church we are called to love the world. We are called to preach the Gospel, we are called to listen to how we have fallen short in being faithful to the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. It's our job to tell this broken and

fallen world that Jesus really is true bread and true drink. And Jesus certainly has the ability to see into hearts in a way that we can't—something that kind of gives Him an unfair advantage of knowing when it's actually loving to act in a way that in our day sounds like He's being a jerk. But what does He tell us about that? What did He say when He asked if they were offended, if they were scandalized? He said, **“the flesh is of no help at all.”** He says your sin can't do it. Your sin can't believe this. In other words your sinful flesh is so sinful, you're going to hear hard things and you're not going to believe it. You can't believe it.

That's how He can look at the fleeing masses and not be worried. Of course they're not going to believe. They are sinful and dead in that sin. Dead men have no life. What gives life? The Spirit. **“It is the Spirit who gives life.”** And how does the Spirit do this? What does Jesus say here? Does He get into language about the Spirit being like wind? No. In fact, in John 3 where it sounds like that's what He's doing, it actually comes down to it not being that. He finally says that just like wind blows and we don't know where it comes from and where it goes, so it is, not with the Spirit Himself, but with those born of the Spirit. What He's saying there isn't that we should look for the Spirit blowing around us, but that we don't understand why some are born of the Spirit and others aren't. And as we look at what He says here we can understand that a bit more. What does He say? **“The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are life.”** Where is the Spirit? In His words. So how is that like the wind? Just like it blows and we don't know where it comes from or where it goes, when someone hears the word and believes we don't know why. When they hear the word and don't believe, we don't know why. All that we know is that this sinful flesh is opposed to the word, but that in the midst of that death the Spirit comes and gives life. The Word is spoken and it brings life.

And how do those words bring life? Look at what they say: **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. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.** Where is life? It is in the flesh of Jesus. It is in the flesh of that man who came down from Heaven. It is in the flesh of this Jesus who bore the sins of the world in that flesh, who nailed that flesh to the cross of Calvary, who shed His blood, shed His life from that flesh that we would live in Him by His resurrection.

In fact as you hear those words, you can't help but think of the Lord's Supper can you? **My flesh is true food, my blood is true drink.** I don't know if you've ever seen art depicting it, but there are some beautiful pieces that connect the cross to the supper, the blood flowing from His wounds into the cup of the altar—and as a note, likewise the water flowing from His side into the font. There is our life Christians. There is our life in that blood coming from His sacrifice on the altar of the cross. That flesh sacrificed on that altar that it would come to our altar and bring with it forgiveness of sins, because as Luther says, where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.

In fact, as I think about this I was reminded this week of what a joy this life and salvation is. As I was sitting with my aunt in her hospital room, I was reminded of what an enemy death is. In fact, I was sitting there thinking of more than a few choice names for death—names that would probably make many of us blush, but words that are appropriate. You see Paul says it himself. He says that the last enemy to be overcome is death. Did you catch that? The last enemy to be overcome. Death isn't what God wanted. Death isn't what God desires to give to us. The pain and the hurting that come with it is all part of this nature opposed to God. But He has overcome it in Christ. The flesh of Christ. The flesh of Christ which gives life to His words. The flesh of Christ that gives the Spirit the ability to bring life and salvation through His Words. The flesh of Christ which is greater than our sinful flesh that will not believe His Words.

In fact, as we look at what we've said today, I'd like to summarize it this way: Jesus speaks hard words knowing that the flesh will not believe, but in those words the Spirit gives life through His flesh. I want to say that again: Jesus speaks hard words knowing that the flesh will not believe, but in those words the Spirit gives life through His flesh. As we understand that then, as His flesh overcomes the unbelieving sinful flesh in us and gives us life by the Spirit in His words, then we can say what Peter says—and I always love this confession. Not something quite as strong as his confession in the other gospels. No, one a bit softer, but still good. One that I think we can relate to: **“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.”** Amen.