

August 19, 2018
Sermon Manuscript

John 6:(25-35, 48-50) 51-59

²⁵ When they found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?” ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

³⁵ 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...”

⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. **⁵¹ 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.**”

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “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. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ 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. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

Better Than Manna

This morning we'll be looking at our gospel passage from John 6, but to do that I want to invite you to look to the insert in your bulletin, which provides us with a little more context to understand what's going on.

Although, what isn't even evident on your insert is that this chapter of John began with Jesus on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee performing one of his most famous miracles: the Feeding of the 5,000. But following the Feeding, after dark, Jesus' disciples had headed back across Sea of Galilee, which is only about 8 miles wide, to the town of Capernaum, which was sort of a home base for Jesus during his three years of public ministry. Now, the disciples had set off in their boat without Jesus. However, when a storm began to blow, this gave Jesus the opportunity to do something else remarkable: he walked on the water, out to their boat, got in, and delivered them safely to the shore at Capernaum.

So, the next morning, back where Jesus had performed the miraculous feeding, this crowd of 5,000 people woke up to realize Jesus was nowhere to be found. So they get in their boats and head to Capernaum where they find Jesus in the synagogue. And this is where our extended passage picks up. Verse 25 says, ²⁵ When they found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” But Jesus answers them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for

the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you...”

Now back in March, I actually preached on this portion of John 6. And I explained that the point Jesus is making is that, even though this crowd is interested in Jesus, they’re pursuing him for the wrong reasons. The previous day Jesus had blessed them with a miraculous meal of fish and bread, but now he recognizes they this is all they want from him: not just another free lunch, but to provide for their physical needs.

Jesus critiques them for merely seeking “food that perishes”, because, in truth, he desires to give them something far greater! That’s what this exchange beginning at verse 28 is about. If you don’t mind me paraphrasing it, the crowd says to Jesus, “Well, if you don’t want us seeking food that perishes, what do you want us to do?” And Jesus answers, “I want you to believe in me.” But their response is, “Why should we believe in you? You haven’t done anything greater than what Moses did? He gave our forefathers miraculous bread – manna – every day, you’ve only given it to us once!” But Jesus corrects them in verse 32, saying “That manna didn’t come from Moses, it came from God! And now, God wants to give you much greater bread – ‘true bread’ – in sending me. For I have come down from heaven to give true life for the world...I am the bread of life.” #

Now, at this point the crowd is very confused. And who can blame them? We may know that Jesus is revealing that God the Father sent him to give up his life on the cross for the salvation of humankind, but they don’t know that. They’re baffled as to how this Jesus could possibly be offering them something greater than manna, but that’s exactly what he says to them in verse 49. He explains, “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.” Simply put: the reason Jesus himself is “better manna”, is better than Moses’ manna is because in him they can find not just daily physical sustenance, but spiritual life – the true life God intended humankind to live: in relationship with him *now*, in this present life, and *forever*.

But Jesus continues. In verse 51, he says, “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.” Well, at this point Jesus is beginning to freak these people out! They’re like, “Oh my God! Now this guy’s talking about us eating him?!?!?” That word “disputed” in verse 52 is sort of understated compared to the original Greek, which indicates these people are on the verge of becoming violent. And this is because Jesus actually sounds to them like he is calling them to cannibalism, which was not only prohibited for Jews, but was abhorred by all of Greco-Roman culture in those days.

Now, at this point Jesus *could* try to assuage their fear that he’s talking about cannibalism. But instead, look what he says in verse 53: “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.” He says, “⁵⁴Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” And four times Jesus between verse 54 and 58 Jesus uses this word that’s been translated as “feed”. But this isn’t the typical Greek verb for eating. Rather, the word used here means to ‘chomp’ or ‘gnaw’! So Jesus is doubling down! He’s saying, “That’s right; you heard me! *The way to eternal life is to chomp or gnaw on my flesh and gulp down my blood!*” People in the crowd were probably getting sick to their stomachs! They had no way of now what we probably know: that Jesus is talking about what? Holy Communion. What this crowd doesn’t understand – and really, how could they? – is that Jesus is describing the sacrament he will institute the night before he dies, which will enable believers to remain in him and experience eternal life. ##

Well, you might’ve noticed that in verse 53 I’ve underlined the word “unless”, because if someone is reading John’s gospel from start to finish, he is signaling them that this difficult saying – or at least difficult for people to understand at the time – pairs with another difficult saying from John chapter 3. And I’ve included that in the box on the bottom of your insert. It’s where Jesus says to

Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” And Jesus has Nicodemus *just as confused* as he has this crowd in chapter 6. Nicodemus says, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” But Jesus answers, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” And with *this* hard saying Jesus speaks of what? Baptism.

So, you see, these two hard sayings – from John 3 and then verse 53 of chapter 6 – are to be taken as a pair, because they are the two sacraments Jesus institutes for believers to enjoy eternal life with him. Baptism is the sacrament for believers to begin eternal life – that’s how we enter in – and Communion is the sacrament Jesus provides for believers to remain – or *continue* or *progress* – in eternal life with him. # # #

But perhaps you’re wondering how this is the case that Holy Communion promotes this eternal life for us? How is it meant to aid believers like us for *remaining* in Christ?

(1) Well, first of all, in Holy Communion we celebrate of what Jesus has done. So it calls to the attention of our hearts and minds the love Jesus demonstrated for us in opening up life-with-God to us by giving over his body and shedding his blood, which won for us the forgiveness of our sins.

(2) But Holy Communion is *also* a means for us to affirm that Jesus’ way of living, in obedience to His Heavenly Father, is also the way of true life for us. So, coming forward and receiving is also a physical way of demonstrating that we desire to leave behind a life of living for ourselves and self-sufficiency to live instead in obedience to our Lord’s two – of loving God and loving our neighbor.

(3) However, this path of life is not something we can walk in our own power. Any of us who have endeavored to take up a life of loving God and our neighbor have surely found how much our sinful condition hinders us. But this is where that historic doctrine, of the Real Presence of Christ being in the elements, becomes so important... because Holy Communion affords us the opportunity to physically welcome Jesus’ presence, and thereby welcome His grace and power (which we should welcome at least through prayer each and every day) to help us to love. #

(4) But finally, it is significant that we don’t take Holy Communion alone. Rather, we come together as a community of believers to be joined together in Him, to become his body. The manner in which we receive Holy Communion together reminds us that we are all equally in need, whether we’re rich or poor; young or old; black, brown, or white. And we need *one another’s* gifts and encouragements and companionship along our way to have any chance of progressing into the people the Lord intends us to be. ## ## ##

Now, having said all this, I should acknowledge that there are many churches in the evangelical tradition today where Holy Communion is practiced once a month or once a quarter, or perhaps not celebrated at all at all. And this is one unfortunate consequence of the Protestant Reformation. I’m sure most of you here have heard of that era in the 16th century, when the work of guys like Martin Luther and Thomas Cranmer and John Calvin to reform corrupt teaching in the church led to traditions like Anglicanism and Lutheranism emerging distinct from the Roman Catholic Church. [[And if you’re not familiar with all that, I’ll be talking about it in much greater detail tomorrow night at Anglicanism 102, if you’d like to attend.]] But during that same Reformation Era there was another group called the “Radical Reformers” or Anabaptists who went further than the Reformers, in particular by denying the Church’s historic teaching of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Well, almost all of American evangelicalism (where HC has been marginalized) are from this Radical Reformation branch of the Christian family tree. And they may feel dominant in American Christianity, but they actually only make up about 15% of Christians worldwide. But if Holy

Communion is as important as I've said, it's unsurprising that in these parts of the church where the Holy Communion was marginalized, the practice of altar calls has arisen to fill its place.

Y'all know what an 'altar call' is? I happen to be quite familiar with the altar call, because when I returned to the faith as a teenager it was in the Southern Baptist church. In that church, every Sunday service would conclude with an altar call where, as the congregation sang a few songs, people could come up to pray with their pastor to dedicate – or re-dedicate – their life to Christ. And anyone who was a member of the congregation for any length of time had probably responded and gone up for the altar call on multiple occasions; people were well aware of those who hadn't. Well, God certainly uses altar calls, without a doubt. But it's notable that altar calls are actually a fairly recent practice in the history of the Church. They began in the 1830s, so less than 200 years ago. And, again, I don't want to denigrate the practice of altar calls at all; God has used them positively in my own life. I simply want to highlight that there is an ongoing need in the Christian life for decision – for affirming our need for Jesus, for physically coming before him and surrendering any way we have been living apart from him, and for resolving to walk forward with him, united with our brothers and sisters in Christ – such that even where it has been taken away man has devised his own, albeit lesser, version of it. The Jesus-instituted altar call is practice meant for all people, every week, who desire to live the eternal quality of life he invites us into. #

Well, in my own faith journey, having spent formative years in Evangelical environments where Holy Communion had been marginalized, coming into Anglicanism brought me into an understanding that Holy Communion was much more than I had been taught. But while I intellectually came to believe in the Real Presence, I have to confess that at times it nagged me that I didn't typically experience any particular *feeling* when I would take communion. Can anyone here relate to that? I suppose I assumed that if the Real Presence of Jesus Christ is in the elements, then I could expect some sort of emotional high – or at least goosebumps or *something (!)* – when I received. [Maybe that's partly why the Radical Reformers rejected the doctrine of the Real Presence, cuz it just felt like bread and wine to them?]

Now, it's certainly possible that at times we receive Holy Communion we *may indeed* experience some unique feelings whether physically or emotionally. However, I want to suggest to you that to expect certain feelings – or some remarkable spiritual experience – missed the point. And that's because the goal of Holy Communion is not manufacture certain feelings or produce some special experience for ourselves. It's about obeying the Lord's command: to "do this in remembrance", to "take and eat"... and to do so in the faith and hope that through it God might make us more capable of loving Him and our neighbor as we leave this place than we were when we came in.

Amen.