

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/16/2015, Pentecost 12B, Lectionary 20
John 6:51-58

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is the last verse of this morning's Gospel Reading, John 6:58. Jesus says this:

⁵⁸This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever. [Please note that glorious stretch of time spoken of here: "for ever"] (John 6:51-58, RSV)

Yesterday, I represented our congregation at Ann Wilson's funeral in her hometown, Taylors Falls, Minnesota. I did not preach then, but as I prepared this morning's sermon throughout this past week, I could not help but think of dear Ann.

In this morning's text from John 6, we have that wonderful phrase: "for ever." The one who eats this Bread will live for ever! For ever! Ponder this, Death, and tremble! You imagine that you have caught Ann. But it is not so. I bet even this moment it is dawning on you, and you are appalled to realize it, that Ann has slipped away from you, for she was not meant for death, but for life for ever. Jesus Christ claims to be the Bread of Life, and he is. He is inexhaustible life for Ann, and he is the death of death.

TROUBLED BY THIS CLAIM

In our Gospel Lesson from John 6, when the people gathered around Jesus hear him make such extraordinary claims, they are perplexed and troubled. Jesus has performed a miracle for them: he has fed five thousand people with but five barley loaves and two fish. They are grateful for that miracle, I am sure, and amazed by it. The closest parallel is Moses feeding the people of Israel in the desert with the manna. But now Jesus points out that those people in the desert ate the manna, and it kept them alive for a while, but in the end, they died. Jesus says that he is not speaking of anything so wondrous, but so ultimately feeble as manna in the wilderness. He claims to be the Bread of Life. He claims that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will live for ever! So the people fear that the claims Jesus is now making go too far. These claims go beyond human doing. Jesus is speaking of himself as the Bread of Life – a Bread that nourishes people for ever! He is a Bread yielding eternity. These claims speak of the eternal God. The people are troubled by these extraordinary claims. Here stands Jesus, a poor man, with nowhere to lay his head. They know his family. He comes from a

working class family. His father is a carpenter. He has no army behind him, no royal court saluting him, just twelve ordinary disciples tagging along with him. He looks like any other man. He is young, probably with the strength and energy of youth, but there seems to be nothing remarkable about his appearance. His beard is like the beard of other men, his sandals like the sandals of other men. Yet he speaks of everlasting life. He claims that he is the source of such life – not simply someone who can pray powerful prayers for life, but rather Life itself. Again and again in the Gospel of John, Jesus makes this extraordinary claim about life:

I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me,
though he die, yet shall he live... (John 11:25, RSV)

I am the way, and the truth, and the life... (John 14:6)

So Jesus stands before the people in his unmistakable humanity, yet speaks of things that can only be true if he is the eternal God.

And so he is. This is what we believe. Jesus is the Bread of Life who grants eternity. In this morning's passage Jesus would have us understand that we should look nowhere else for God than to him, Jesus, as he stands before us in his flesh and blood. The crowds gathered around Jesus of Nazareth were crowds gathered around God. Do not seek God apart from this good man, Jesus Christ.

FAITH IN CHRIST

Jesus speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Many preachers have taken this to be a Eucharistic reference. They have understood Jesus to be speaking of the Blessed Sacrament that we will soon receive. Martin Luther certainly believed that the bread and wine of the Holy Communion are really the body and blood of Jesus meant for our salvation. But in Luther's sermons on John 6, he does not limit the idea of eating the flesh of Christ to the reception of the Blessed Sacrament. Rather, Luther argues that Jesus is speaking of faith in him. To believe in Jesus and to cast our lot in with him, body and soul, is to eat his flesh and to drink his blood.

Faith in Christ is what works everlasting life in us. We are talking about a faith that works eternal life even if we are too sick to make it to the Holy Communion, or are imprisoned or otherwise deprived of the Sacrament. We are speaking of that faith in Christ which amounts to flinging ourselves into the hands of Jesus, of loving him with such love that we yield our lives to him, of trusting him for our salvation and for eternity. Most exactly, when Jesus speaks of eating his flesh he means what he says toward the end of our passage: that we should abide in him and he in us:

⁵⁶He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me,
and I in him. (John 6:56, RSV)

Faith in Christ means abiding in him and he in us. As Luther puts it, faith is a marvelous thing, mingling together Christ and us:

Faith gives me eternal life, for it gives me Him who is eternal life and the bread of life. (Luther, sermon on John 6:51-58)

For Luther, faith in Christ is not some cold concept in the heart:

Thus faith, too, cannot be a mere thought of our Lord God; for thoughts are not sufficient... My heart must take hold of and apprehend Christ; I must cleave to His flesh and blood and say: "To this I cling, to this I will remain faithful. I would rather surrender life and limb. May I fare with it as God wills."

Luther points out that faith cannot amount to mere friendly thoughts about Jesus, but more along the lines of love for Jesus:

Satan is an angry adversary. He does not worry much about thoughts. Something must be found in you which will prove too strong for him.

In this tough world, none of us has perfect faith in Jesus and love for him. Luther knew that. He knew that often we stumble and fall and that outwardly, we are often disappointing and do not look all that different from the world. And yet Luther wants us to understand that if we are baptized and love Jesus, there is a force within – Someone within us – who abides with us, who might make us very strong at the critical moment, and who means to grant us eternal life. Luther says this:

In [the] weakness, sin, folly, and frailty [of Christians] there abides inwardly and secretly a force and power unrecognizable by the world and hidden from its view, but one which, for all that, carries off the victory; for Christ resides in them and manifests Himself to them. I have seen many of these who, externally, tottered along very feebly; but when it came to the test and they faced the court, Christ bestirred Himself in them, and they became so staunch that the devil had to flee.

LIKE LIONS

In one of St. John Chrysostom's glorious meditations on the Blessed Sacrament, he invites believers to return from the Sacrament like lions:

Let us then return from that table like lions breathing fire,
having become terrible to the devil; thinking on our Head,
and on the love which He hath shown for us. (Homily on John
6:41-51)

The death of a Christian is that moment when theology is converted into reality, when the exhortation to be "like lions breathing fire, having become terrible to devil" becomes the reality of springing forth into eternity, full of energy, full of inexhaustible life. I like to think of Ann Wilson that way: not just quietly walking into heaven, but springing forward like a lion, breathing fire, and filled with joy and peace and energy and life – life that will never end, through Jesus Christ, the very Bread of Life, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.