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

In this morning’s sermon, I would like us to take a break from St. John Chapter 6. We are in the midst of five Sundays in a row devoted to this chapter. It is a chapter called “The Bread of Life Discourses.” The glorious theme of this chapter is that our Lord Jesus is the Bread of Life. He is the source of inexhaustible life for us. So that is a happy theme. And yet, I bet you can join me in sensing that things are starting to go wrong in today’s reading. The problem is that Jesus speaks of his flesh and his blood. His words go this way:

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 he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:53-54, RSV)

From our point of view, here in our two-thousand-year-old church, we can make sense of this saying. We believe that it refers to the Blessed Sacrament – the very Sacrament we will soon receive. We can understand the words of Jesus as referring to the high blessing we have of coming into the very presence of our resurrected Lord Jesus by way of the Bread and Wine. But what chance did the people in the Gospel story have to understand things that way? For them, the notion of eating the flesh of Jesus and drinking his blood was an appalling idea. Soon, they will turn away from Jesus. You can almost feel the storm clouds beginning to gather around Jesus.

So I invite us in this sermon to step back a bit from John 6 and remind ourselves what a great subject Jesus is talking about when he speaks of the Bread of Life. Life! That is my subject this morning. Life, sweet life! Life is to be cherished. We should do the best we can to live a full life. And so I want us to take a look at this morning’s Psalm 34. It speaks of life. I want us to work our way through this brief Psalm passage and see what Jesus has to say to us about life. It is the Spirit of Jesus who inspired the Psalmist and all of the writers of the Bible. And so let us see what Jesus would have us to know about life, about abundant life.

Before I plunge into our reading from Psalm 34, I want to pause for a moment to make a point that means much to me—old pietist that I am. I will probably speak of this again and again as times goes by. My theme goes this way: The center of the Gospel is that we can give our hearts and our lives to
Jesus. He has done so for us, and we can do the same for him. Jesus has given
his heart and his life to us. That is what he declares to us in the Blessed
Sacrament—that he gave his body and his blood for us. So, the Gospel is that
we can trust ourselves over to Jesus and live for him. We can abide in him and
he in us. And that is why we can be grateful for today’s Psalm: It gives us some
concrete instruction about what it means to give our hearts and our lives to
Jesus.

Let us take a look at our Psalm. Let us imagine ourselves to be a gathering
of children around Jesus. Let us imagine ourselves to be a congregation of
little ones sitting around Jesus for a children’s sermon he has prepared for us.
You will recall from the gospel stories that Jesus welcomed the children, even
infants (Luke 18:15). The older folks and the disciples might have wanted to
send the children away, as if Jesus did not have time for them. But Jesus does
have time for them! Glad to say! I am glad that Jesus has time for the children
because compared to him, no matter how old or white-haired we might be, we
are but children. So I am glad that Jesus has time for the children. This coming
week will be Vacation Bible School here at Immanuel. I like to believe, I like to
picture it, that Jesus will be meeting with our children this coming week. So
let us take our place with the children, and notice that Jesus asks us a
question about life.

11Come, children, and listen to me;
   I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
12Who among you loves life
   and desires long life to enjoy prosperity? (Psalm 34:11-12, LBW)

Picture us then throwing our little arms into the air and waving them about,
signaling thereby that we know the answer! That is what happens in Vacation
Bible School when Vicar Caleb or Karen Bazik and other teachers talk with the
children. The children throw their little arms in the air and think to
themselves, “I know the answer, I know the answer!” And so Jesus asked the
question:

12Who among you loves life
   and desires long life to enjoy prosperity?

And let us each one, both young and old, eagerly answer, “I do! I do! I want
long life and to enjoy prosperity!” Hear, then, what Jesus has to say to us
about life. These things are attainable for us. Whether we are rich or poor, old
or young, we can move toward life by doing the things of which Jesus speaks
in this Psalm. Verses thirteen and fourteen go this way:

13Keep your tongue from evil-speaking
and your lips from lying words.

14Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

Consider that last line:

...seek peace and pursue it.

If we would have long life to enjoy prosperity, then among other things we should “seek peace and pursue it.” As one of the old preachers put it, we should not simply prefer peace but “hunt after it, chase it with eager desire.”

Go after it. Pursue it. Let it be with us that when we enter a room, we bring along with us some peace for that room. We do not stomp into the room criticizing everybody in sight, but rather we try to be the kind of person who makes things better when we come along. If people are fussing and wrangling with one another, then let us try to calm things down. Let us try to be the kind of person who actively seeks peace and pursues it. Jesus says that seeking peace will help us to enjoy life and to live life more abundantly.

Verse 13 gives us some more concrete instruction about what we should do if we would have a long life to enjoy prosperity. It is a verse that encourages us to get our tongues under control. The verse goes this way:

13Keep your tongue from evil-speaking
   and your lips from lying words.

Many of you know Martin Luther’s explanation of the Eighth Commandment—the commandment that says, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” In his Small Catechism, when Luther is explaining this Eighth Commandment, his famous explanation speaks of “charitable interpretations” of the deeds of our neighbors. His explanation goes this way:

We should fear and love God, and so we should not tell lies about our neighbor, nor betray, slander, or defame him, but should apologize for him, speak well of him, and interpret charitably all that he does.

When we are put out by someone and inclined to say something hurtful to that one, let us remember that we are not walking in that person’s shoes. We do not know the stress he or she may be under or the exhaustion with which

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1 Charles Spurgeon makes this lovely point about the active search for peace in his Treasury of David on Psalm thirty-four.
they are trying to carry on. Let us keep our “tongue from evil-speaking” and certainly let there be no “lying words” coming from our lips. Therefore, children gathered around Jesus, if we would have long life to enjoy prosperity, let us be even more careful about our tongues and our words.

So far Jesus has been talking about fairly specific ways of living a good life: we should seek peace and pursue it, and we should guard our tongues that we do not do so much mischief in life. Now let us notice a more general appeal to us. It is the kind of appeal that takes into account all sorts of troubles we humans can cause on earth. In Psalm 34, Jesus says this:

14Turn from evil and do good;

This is another form of the second great commandment Jesus gives us. That second great commandment is that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). If we would love our neighbors as ourselves then let us “turn from evil and do good.” It is part of a full life for us, that we should turn away from evil, from sin, from vice, and instead of using our time and money in those bad ways we should, as Jesus says, “do good.”

Finally let us notice that in this little children’s sermon represented by Psalm 34, Jesus also speaks of the first and greatest commandment—that is, Jesus encourages us to love God above all else, to love God with all of our heart and mind and soul. Psalm 34 speaks of the love of God using the old language of “fearing the Lord.” And so the opening words in this little sermon go this way:

11Come, children, and listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

This does not mean terror or dismay before the Lord. It means something more lovely. It means not wanting to disappoint the Lord. It means fearing to let the Lord down. It means fearing to hurt God—not by striking him a blow, but by disappointing him and being disloyal to him. In Psalm 34 Jesus teaches us that if we would have long life to enjoy prosperity then we should love the Lord.

What we are dealing with in this little sermon is the distinction between “existence” and “life.” One of the saddest things is the possibility that we should die never having lived! It is a sad possibility lying before us, that we will pass the years—twenty years, forty years, ninety years, or whatever—that we will pass the years granted to us never really having lived, at least never really having lived with the abundance of life that Jesus wants for us. We are at our best when we love God and love our neighbors. We are having our most full life when we do such things as seek peace and pursue it, keep
our tongues from evil speaking, turn from the bad and do the good, and learn the fear of the Lord—learn to want to please God above all else.

And so it is that Jesus teaches us children in his children’s sermon called Psalm 34. To our great teacher, even to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, be the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen