

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
August 16, 2009  
John 6:51-69 (Proper 15 B)

*“Living, Life-Giving, Eternal Bread”*

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Our text for this morning is part of a most interesting and noteworthy chapter in the Scriptures. John chapter 6 begins with the account of Jesus feeding the 5000 along the shore of the Sea of Galilee with five small loaves of bread and two fish. The people were so impressed by this miracle that they attempted to make Jesus a king. He withdraws from the crowd to prevent this. The chapter continues with the account of Jesus walking on the water and meeting his disciples in the midst of the wave tossed lake. Then comes the interaction between Jesus and the crowd who had searched, followed, and found him and then entered into a discussion with Jesus about the bread of life. In fact, this discourse has been the Gospel reading for the last several Sundays and has been mentioned in our previous sermons. Today's Gospel is the climax of that discussion. On the basis of this text then we will prayerfully consider this theme: “Living, Life-Giving, Eternal Bread”.

I. Living ... Bread

For someone unfamiliar with the context of these words, they appear quite shocking. Indeed they sound cannibalistic and very out of place in a religious discussion. Jesus said, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” To the Jewish hearers of his day, those words were more than shocking, they ran counter to everything they had been taught. There was no way that anyone could do what Jesus was suggesting. Indeed, the idea of drinking the blood of someone was most assuredly against the kosher food regulations of the ceremonial law where the eating of blood is strictly forbidden. For as it is written in the book of Leviticus: “Any Israelite or any alien living among them who eats any blood-- I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.” (Leviticus 17:10-11)

But of course, these words are just as shocking to us unless we understand fully what Jesus means. There may even be a clue in the words from Leviticus which speaks about atonement in the blood. But to see that, we should look carefully at the first words of this text.

Jesus teaches us as he says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” The Greek text here is an interesting construction. What Jesus literally says is this: “I am the bread, the living” The twofold repetition of the definite article “the” is for emphasis. It has the effect of saying, “I am the one and only bread, the one and only living one.” Jesus sets forth here the unique nature of his ministry and his saving work.

## II. Life-Giving ... Bread

There is probably nothing worse than a piece of dry, stale, moldy bread. But this bread that Jesus speaks about is not just fresh and wholesome, it lives. It lives because He himself is the bread. It is life-giving bread. It imparts life to those who partake it. Jesus is truly the source of life for us. His life was given that we might have life forever. And in that thought is the real understanding of what Jesus means when He says that we should eat of his flesh and drink of his blood. Jesus is speaking in very sacrificial language here. He would give up his flesh to death and shed his blood for us on the cross. But he also rose again from the dead. His flesh is living flesh, his blood is life-giving blood because he conquered sin, death, and the power of the devil for us. Jesus would do all these things that we might look to him for salvation. For there really is no other way.

That is why he says with such finality, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." There is no other way to life. There is no other road or path that leads to heaven and life eternal. There are no other options. Jesus said it himself at another time, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, except by me." St. Peter made the same point when he spoke in the book of Acts, "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven, given among men whereby we must be saved." To have eternal life is to be in a living relationship with our Lord and Savior. We must by faith put our trust fully and completely in Him. And Jesus uses the language of eating and drinking because that reminds us of how close our lives are connected with his life.

As our text continues, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him." What a beautiful and comforting promise this is. When our lives are touched by pain and sorrow, when loneliness may be the one overriding feeling in our lives, we hear the promise of Jesus that he abides in us and we remain in Him. He cannot leave us without hope or comfort for He gave up His very life for us that we might have life and have it to the full.

## III. Eternal ... Bread

And that promise is not just for this life. It is for all eternity. Jesus again speaks to those who were listening to him and reminds them that the living bread which came down from heaven is of greater value than even the manna which miraculously fed the children of Israel during the 40 years of their wilderness wandering. For as Jesus says, "Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." Yes, God had provided the children of Israel with food, but though it was supernaturally provided, it did not have supernatural effects. They all still died. The effects of sin were not erased by eating the manna which came from heaven. "The wages of sin is death", so St. Paul writes to the Romans. But the effects of sin are erased in the gift which Jesus gives, in the living, life-giving, eternal bread. "The free gift of God is eternal life", as St. Paul continues. And that brings us back literally to the opening verses of our text. For there we heard Jesus say, "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the

life of the world." (v.51) The special nature of the bread is because of the gift that is associated with it. First of all, it is given to the world by the Father in heaven. He sends His Son. But secondly, the gift is also the giver. The Son also gives. He gives of Himself. Scripture speaks of this many times. "The Son of God gave himself for us." (Galatians 2:20) "Christ has given himself for us." (Ephesians 5:2) "I lay down my life ..." (John 10:17) "The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28) Jesus Christ gives of himself and he lays down his life on the cross.

#### IV. It is Not Easy

The last verses of this Gospel lesson however leave us with a warning that the road of discipleship is not easy. They relate that many heard the words of Jesus and abandoned him. As the text says: "Many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard saying who can listen to it?'" and "they turned back and no longer walked with him." And Jesus very plaintively asks his disciples, "Do you want to go away as well?" The message of salvation in Jesus Christ is a hard word for many. For it causes us all to put aside ourselves and trust solely in Christ. Our pride makes that a hard thing to do. But Peter, if you will, redeems the moment when he says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life ..." There is the answer in words that we sang before as the verse before the Gospel readings. They are words that our part of one of our liturgies. They are words that put the matter into its proper context for they remind us of what a great and wondrous and gracious God we have. What a gift we receive from him who is the Living, Life-Giving, Eternal Bread.

So we pray in the words of the hymn:

Lord Jesus Christ, Life-Giving Bread  
May I in grace possess you.  
Let me with holy food be fed,  
In hunger I address you.  
Prepare me well for you, O Lord,  
And, humbly by my prayer implored,  
Give me your grace and mercy.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.