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John 6:49-58: *Feasting on Flesh*

Preached at Trinity CRC

April 29, 2018

This morning we'll be reading from the Gospel of John.

We're meeting together at the Lord's Table this morning...

So I thought it would be appropriate to have a message about it.

I invite you to turn in your Bibles to John 6...

Jesus' talk about being the Bread of Life.

We'll be reading verses 49-58.

Hear now the word of the Lord.

⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

⁵² Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

⁵³ Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

Back in grade school—maybe 4th or 5th grade—I was assigned to do a report on an explorer.

So I chose to research the Spanish explorer, Juan Ponce de Leon...

Maybe you've heard the name?

I chose *him* specifically because of the legend tied to his name:

Ponce de Leon was rumored to be searching for the Fountain of Youth.

He was rumored to be looking for this “body of water with magical powers to cure illness and reverse aging.” (History.com)

But it wasn't just him...

There are records that show that interest in the magical spring goes back all the way to the 5th century BC.

Alexander the Great is even said to have looked for a river to turn back time.

We may be convinced that there is no such thing today...

But does that mean we've stopped looking?

There are anti-aging creams...

Anti-aging lasers...

There are labs out there who have tested something called parabiosis on mice...

It's a process where the blood of an old mouse is joined to the blood of a new mouse...

The older tissue of the mouse was rejuvenated...

But don't get any ideas.

Ten of thousands of people still visit the Fountain of Youth Archeological Park in St. Augustine, where Ponce de Leon first landed in Florida.

The top attraction is a drink of water from the Fountain of Youth.

What is at the heart of our search for youth?

Why are we so drawn to methods that slow the aging process...

Making extravagant purchases or unwise decisions that make us feel or look younger?

What's really going on here?

I was looking up anti-aging methods and a phrase stood out:

“Life-extension.”

We're wanting to prolong our lives...

Because, as the saying goes, the only thing that's certain in life is death and taxes.

We're all confronted with death.

Something inside of us knows that death is not what we're made for...

Death seems so unnatural to us...

We were made for life!

That something inside of us is right.

We were *not* made for death...

Death *is* unnatural...

But death is the consequence of our sin.

When our first ancestors sinned and tried to do things their own way...

They introduced death into this world.

We were separated from God...

And we were subject to both physical and spiritual death.

And so now we see the consequences of our sin and brokenness every day.

A man crashing a van into a crowd of people...

Bringing death to 10 lives.

An elderly man losing his life as his organs slowly fail as a result of age.

A young teen contemplating taking their own life because of loneliness and depression.

The feelings of sadness and fear as we look at our own aging bodies...

We see the consequence of our sin...

And we look for ways to stop dying...

Ways to dull the pain that comes when our loved-ones die.

We look for ways to reverse the curse of death.

But nothing has worked:

Our faces still show those wisdom lines...

Commonly referred to as wrinkles.

Our bodies are still feeling the impact of Tuesday night ball hockey even though it's Friday.

And our purchases—cars, motorcycles, boats—

They may cover up our feelings for a little bit, but the feelings never really go away...

Deep down, underneath it all we know that we're all headed in the same direction.

In our passage this morning Jesus tells the crowd:

“Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, *and they died.*” (6:49)

Yes, the manna came from heaven...

And yes, it sustained them as they walked through the wilderness...

But it didn't bring an end to death....

It didn't solve the problem.

They faced the same problem we're facing today:

Death that brings an end to life.

You cannot run from or deny the facts...

“Your ancestors ate the manna, and they died.”

“And just like them, you have no life in yourselves.”

But God gives life in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven.”

“Whoever eats this bread will live forever.”

The problem is that our sin brought about death...

The problem is that our sin separated us from the Father...

The one who created us.

And we're not able to get back.

We are dead in our sin.

But Jesus stands with confidence and says, “I am the solution.”

“I am the way to eternal life.”

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”

The people listening to this are repulsed by the words of Jesus.

Remember, they're Jews and Jews have certain laws given to them about eating...

The law of Moses did not allow them to drink blood...

The law of Moses did not allow them to eat meat with blood still in it...

So from a ceremonial point of view...

To eat the Son of Man and to drink his blood would have been an abhorrent idea.

But beyond the ceremonial...

What Jesus is saying sounds cannibalistic and repulsive.

And it's not like he's trying to sugar coat it either.

If he was trying to make this easier for them to swallow (pun intended)...

He could have used the word "body" like the other gospel writers do:

"Take and eat. This is my body." (Matt 26:26)

Instead he uses the word "flesh":

"This bread is my *flesh*..." (6:51)

"Unless you eat the *flesh* of the Son of Man...you have no life in you." (6:53)

And just to hammer the point home, Jesus uses 2 different words for "eat."

The first word he uses is the common word for eat.

"Anyone may eat this bread and not die." (6:50)

It's like saying, "Eat your vegetables."

But after the Jews start fighting among themselves about what Jesus is saying...

Jesus pushes them to go a little further...

He increases the shock value of what he's saying.

In vv. 54, 56, 57, and 58 he uses a different word for "eat."

Instead of using the common word "eat," he uses a word that means to "chew."

It's a word that was used for animals munching or chewing especially on plants.

So think of a cow chewing on grass...(chew for a little bit)

(There's a YouTube video of 12 hours of a cow chewing on grass)

"Whoever chews on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."

God gives life in the flesh and blood of Jesus...

But what does this mean?

What does it mean to eat the living bread that comes down from heaven?

What does it mean to eat his flesh and drink his blood?

This whole section from chapter 6—

Jesus' discourse on being the Bread of Life—

Is maybe the best example of holding Word and Sacrament together—

“Believing-hearing” and “believing-eating.” (Kittel, “trogo”)

The Gospel message and the Lord's Supper. (cf. Belgic Conf., Art. 33)

Even though we're looking at just these 9 specific verses...

We must look at what comes before.

In v. 28 of this same chapter the people around Jesus ask him a question:

“What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”

“What do we have to do to inherit this eternal life you're talking about?”

And Jesus responds:

“Believe in him whom he has sent.” (6:29)

“This is the will of my Father: that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (6:40)

‘Believing-hearing’:

Belief and trust that comes through *hearing* the Good News of God's love for us through the Son.

And now in our passage we have believing-eating.

The belief through hearing the gospel is confirmed and accepted—

We can think of it becoming more concrete—

In the action of eating and chewing.

Christ comes to us in the word, and Christ comes to us in the sacrament.

And what is this belief?

What do we confirm and accept? (PAUSE)

That Jesus Christ gave his flesh for the life of the world.

What Jesus is giving to us is himself.

He is giving himself to a people facing death.

A people separated from the source of all life.

So now we do not have to despair:

When loved ones pass on;

As our bodies sag and become frail;

As we dread over the guilt of our own sin;

And as the cruel voice of brokenness whispers in our ear...

We are assured that Jesus gave his flesh for the life of the world.

He experienced death on a cross...

He experienced separation from God so that we don't have to anymore.

His sacrifice is vicarious...

He did it for us. (PAUSE)

And this Suffering Servant comes to us in a way that we can actually experience.

Listen to these words from the Belgic Confession, Art. 35:

“Just as truly as we take and hold the sacrament in our hands...

And eat and drink it with our mouths...

So truly we receive into our souls...

The true body and true blood of Christ...

We receive these by faith, which is the hand and mouth of our souls.”

So Christ's words from the book of John become reality for us:

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...” (6:53-54)

For “we are not wrong when we say that what is eaten [at this Table] is Christ's own natural body...

And what is drunk is his own blood”—

“But we eat his body not by our mouths, but by the Spirit through faith.” (Belgic Conf., Art. 35)

Does this make sense?

Because this is an amazing gift from God.

There are really 3 main views on the Lord's Supper and what happens at this Table...

One view is transubstantiation:

Scary word, but when you break it down all it means is transformed substance.

In this view the substance of the bread and wine are actually changed into the body and blood of Jesus...

It still looks like bread and wine in appearance, but its invisible substance is transformed.

This is the view of the Catholic Church.

Another view is on the other end of the spectrum...

Christ's body is not present at all—physically or spiritually—at the Table.

Bread and wine are merely a representation of body and blood.

Many non-denominational and churches coming from the Baptist tradition hold this view.

Really they don't even consider it a sacrament (meaning mystery)...

They consider it an ordinance.

The third view walks somewhere in between these two.

We don't believe that there is a physical change that happens in these elements...

The bread is still bread; and the wine is still wine.

But we believe that something more is happening than just a representation.

We believe that Christ is spiritually present with us in this meal.

We are joined in intimate union with the giver of all life.

And we truly receive into our spirit the true body and true blood of our Savior.

We can't explain how it happens...

It's not the bread and the wine in themselves that do anything...

It's the living bread, Jesus Christ, that is communicated to us in the sacrament.

But we rest in the mystery, and receive the abundant gift of nourishment for our lives.

The faith that's been given to us through the preached word (believing-hearing)...

Is confirmed for us in this very real gift of God's love (believing-eating).

The worship team is going to come up and lead us in a song.

I invite you to sit in silence...

Chew on the word you've just heard:

That Jesus Christ offered himself for you...

So that you could have life.

When the song is done we'll join the preached word with the sacrament and experience the fullness of Christ's life given for us.