

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Pentecost 14
August 26, 2018

Bread of Heaven (Part 3)
John 6:56-69

Jesus said that he is the bread that has come down from heaven, and that everyone who eats that bread will live forever. What are we to make of those words - that Jesus is the bread of heaven? We find these words sandwiched in the middle of the Gospel of John. From reading the new testament, we see that Jesus was good at slicing to the heart of the matter. Quite often, what Jesus said got a rise out of people. He had a kind of wry wit about him. But enough of this crummy, half-baked humor. Together let us explore what Jesus meant when he said that he is the bread of heaven.

The Gospel of John is known for the creative ways that Jesus refers to himself. It is in John that Jesus announces that “I am the good shepherd.” In our minds, we conjure up pleasant images, of green fields and gently flowing streams and cool winds blowing, with Jesus watching over us like a shepherd watches over his flock.

Or elsewhere in John, Jesus proclaims, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” Again, good pictures come into our minds. We envision ivy-covered walls and grape vineyards. We think of life and growth and beauty.

But here in this passage, Jesus gives us another “I am” saying, but this one is not so pleasant. Jesus starts off by declaring that he is the bread of life, that he is the bread of heaven that has come down to earth, so that people might have a share in eternal life.

That Jesus is the bread of life is not such a bad image. But then Jesus ups the ante. He goes on to say that this bread that he gives us is his flesh, and that those who do not eat his flesh and drink his blood will not share in eternal life.

Eating bread and drinking blood - not exactly something we want to hear about during the family hour on TV, let alone in worship on Sunday morning.

So, what are we to make of Jesus' words? One Sunday morning, during a communion service, the minister of a certain church was saying the familiar words: "This is my body which is broken for you. And this is my blood which is shed for you," when all of a sudden a small girl sitting in the sanctuary cried out: "Oh, yuk," the members of the church looked at the girl with horrified and shocked faces. But perhaps that little girl had a greater appreciation of what was taking place than anyone else there.

What are we to make of Jesus' words when he says that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood? At first it sounds a lot like cannibalism, and many people in the Roman Empire believed that Christians were just that, cannibals.

But what Jesus is saying here, and what he is saying throughout the Gospels, is that faith in him means far more than just believing that he exists. Rather, if we have faith in Jesus, then we are going to make him a part of our very lives, just as the food we eat and the beverages we drink become a part of our being.

But not many people understand that that is what faith means. One Sunday night there was a Catholic talk show on the radio, but that night they also had a Lutheran pastor on the program as a guest. When they went to the phone lines, one of the first questions was this: It was a young woman who said: "I am a Catholic and my fiancé is a Lutheran. We are not sure what church to go to. But we figure that it really doesn't matter, since all that is important is that we believe in God."

The sad thing is that many people think that that is all it takes. That everything is going to be just fine as long as we believe in God.

The problem is that for many people, believing in God is not much different than believing in UFO's or believing in Big Foot or believing in the Loch Ness monster. Just because we believe that there is a God is not going to get us anywhere. The Bible itself reminds us that even Satan believes in God.

The way we use the word "believe" today had emptied it of any meaning. Asking someone if they believe in Jesus is a pointless question. Probably the best word that is available to us now that we have ruined "believe" is the word "trust." Do we trust in God? Do we trust in Jesus Christ?

When we ask someone if they trust in Jesus Christ, we are asking not only if they believe that he exists, but we are also asking if that belief affects the way that they live. Again, in our passage from John, Jesus said that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. In other words, we must take Jesus and make him apart of ourselves. By trusting in Jesus, then, we try to live our lives after the pattern that Jesus lived his. So in trusting Jesus, we say "yes" to him not only with our minds, but also with our hearts and our whole being.

In the mountains of northern Indonesia is a seminary where young people are trained to go out to preach and teach in the name of Jesus Christ. Although European settlers have been in the country for more than 200 years, most of the people in the jungles have never heard the name of Jesus. In the jungle, they believe that every tree and stream and animal has a spirit that must be appeased. So when illness or accident or disease strike, the people believe that it is the work of one of these spirits.

So at this seminary in Indonesia, each week when the classes are over, the women and men, some as young as 18 years old, walk deep into the jungle, going from village to village, and teach the people about Christ.

That work involves challenge and even danger, but those seminary students have come to see the great change for the good that they have been able to bring about in those people's lives. Those seminary students are serving Jesus not just with their minds but with their very lives.

Are we willing to do the same thing? Are we willing to say "yes" to Jesus not just with what we say, but with how we live our lives? That requires a decision on our part. The Bible tells us that after Jesus spoke these words, many who had been following him around stopped doing so. When they saw what kind of a total commitment it would take, many people decided that they just were not interested.

So Jesus turned to the twelve disciples and asked if they also would like to leave. But Peter spoke up for the whole group and said: "Jesus, there is no other place to go. We have come to see that you are the only way to eternal life."

And Jesus asks the same question of us every Sunday morning. Do we want to go with him or do we prefer to stay behind? Several years ago a man was discovered, who had been marooned alone for a long time on a small island in the Pacific. A passing ship was all ready to rescue him, but he refused to go. It seems that while he was on the island he had made a pet out of a monkey that he had found. But the ship had strict regulations that no animals were permitted to be on board. So the man let the ship leave without him.

Jesus comes like a rescue ship to us. But do we go with him? Or do we have some excuse to stay behind? Jesus Christ wants us to make a life or death decision. If we say "yes" to him, not just with our voices, but with our very lives, then we choose the path that leads to eternal life. As we begin a new chapter here at Good Shepherd let us trust in Jesus Christ to lead us to be the people he has called us to be. Amen.