

Sermon for Proper 15, Year B

The Text: John 6:51-58

If there was a local paper in Capernaum when Jesus was there, He would have been front page news several times. Many of the things Jesus said and did people found shocking. They accused Him of sinning when He healed the sick on the Sabbath and called God His own Father (John 5:16-18). The Pharisees and others thought Him scandalous. They wanted to kill Him for speaking the truth. The name of Jesus would have been a hot topic on the highways and byways of Palestine.

Our Lord's words from today's gospel reading would have been at the top of a list of things Jews found scandalous. Jesus said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews were outraged at what they heard and they asked an obvious question, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?"

The Scriptures forbid murder and the eating of human flesh. The consumption of blood of any kind was also sinful (Genesis 9:4). So Jesus was not talking about cannibalism. Yet he continued, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

Jesus did not mean that the Jews were to carve Him into steaks. Let's use the Scriptures, and not human reason, to understand His words. In John 6:35, which we heard a couple of Sundays ago, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." Here Jesus is using eating and drinking as symbols for faith. Those who consume Jesus' words, trusting in them as divine wisdom, shall be satisfied in their body and soul. In Matthew 4 Jesus compares food to the gifts He gives, saying, "Man cannot live on bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). Christ quenches all our deep hunger for love and thirst for forgiveness. Those who receive Him in faith receive food that gives everlasting life.

But Jesus doesn't use only eating and drinking as metaphors. He is building up to something more. His words point to a meal that is not symbolic. He is hinting at the Supper He will establish in the upper room on the night when He would be betrayed. There again Jesus' words are perplexing to human logic: "Take and eat; this is my body, which is given for you... This is my blood of the new covenant." What He says sounds ridiculous; that He would give us His own body and blood to eat and drink. Perhaps at some time you also have asked the same question the Jews did: "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?"

These words go against everything we know about physics and time and space. Human knowledge alone cannot understand these words of Christ. It takes insight from the Holy Spirit to understand the wisdom of God. Take Nicodemus for example, he was puzzled when Jesus said, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Human understanding heard Jesus speaking the impossible: that we must re-enter our mother's womb to be born again. But Jesus was speaking about Baptism, the re-birth accomplished by God through water and His Word. With man, to be born again is impossible. With God, everything He says is possible. He fulfils what He promises.

Christ's words are not scandalous to our Lutheran ears, even if we do not understand their every detail. We have heard them proclaimed in the Divine Services since we were infants. We have watched our parent's commune, been taught them in Sunday school, confirmation and in sermons and Bible studies. We know Jesus gives us His body and blood in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. He says so, and we believe it. He places Himself there according to His own words, not by the power of the pastor. By bread and wine, Christ enters our body to grant us forgiveness of our sins, life and salvation.

This is a mystery, and that is what the word 'sacrament' means. Neither scientific endeavour nor human reason will ever be able to understand or explain what Jesus does and gives in the Lord's Supper. It is those with faith who hear Jesus speak and come to His table with joy to receive His gifts.

Christ is of course not present in all bread and wine, but by His word He places His body and blood in the elements of Holy Communion. By your eating and drinking He gives you His life. This is how He has chosen to

come and live in you. Your salvation does not depend on having great intelligence, but on faith in His Word. By trusting in Jesus. God chose the simple things of bread and wine to feed you His body and blood to deliver to you forgiveness, life and salvation.

This means Christ is bodily presence among us in the Sacrament of the Altar. Coming to worship we enter into His holy presence. Jesus' presence here shapes the way we worship. We don't come to be entertained or to make this time about us. We come to be with Jesus. We come because we need Him and the life He gives. That's why Lutherans keep the old name for worship, the Divine Service, for it is here that Jesus comes to serve us in a way he does nowhere else. He comes in His words to provide us with the benefits of His suffering, death and resurrection. The words of liturgy give us Jesus—His forgiveness, His life, His salvation.

Christ is here among us even though we can't see Him, just as He is present in the bread and wine on the altar and we cannot taste Him. This is impossible with man. Nothing is impossible for God. He is able to be wherever He chooses. And He has chosen to be bodily present in the Sacrament of the Altar. At His Supper He speaks over the elements, "*This is my body... this is my blood.*" Jesus didn't say "this is like" or "this symbolises" or "let's pretend this is my body". He spoke plainly "*This is*", and that is where you shall find Jesus, in the place where He promises to be, so He can bless you with forgiveness, life and salvation.

The scandal here is not the words of Jesus, but human sin and the way He was treated. The shocking headline should read 'Author of Life Killed: He Did It for you.' On the lonely mount of Calvary, Jesus gave His flesh over to death for the life of the world. He died on the Cross for our scandalous words, our shocking thoughts, our disgraceful actions, our immoral behaviour, our unbelief in His word. He took them all on Himself. He shed His blood to pay the price of all our sin and now we live. It is unbelievable that our holy perfect God would do that for us, but the word proclaims it, and with joy and thanksgiving, we believe it. We trust in Jesus.

That is the wonderfully scandalous truth: The Son of God died in the place of all sinners, and we are forgiven. He feeds us His body and blood to give us eternal life. Jesus received the punishment we deserve and in

return He gives us His love, His life and His righteousness. God is scandalously loving to us. He loves sinners and washes us clean in the waters of Baptism, then sends His Holy Spirit to make us holy just as He is holy.

The risen Lord Jesus is present with us today as we sing praises to God for His amazing love to us. He is present in His Spirit, in His word, and He comes for our benefit, to grant us grace, to share His love and to give us strength to keep following Him and believing the scriptures.

We might be frowned upon by the world for trusting Jesus or made fun of by other believers for trusting in His words but what a small price to pay compared to the riches of God's grace given both here and in eternity.

For those who hear the words of Jesus in faith, His words are not scandalous, they are beautiful and true. They give grace and health to body and soul that we would be built up in grace to live wisely as children of God. Amen.