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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15B)

August 16, 2015

Text: John 6:51–69

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I heard one theologian say several years ago that John 6 is the Lord's church shrinkage program. This insightful teacher was winsomely responding to the oftentimes ridiculous claims of the church growth movement. That movement has fizzled a bit but it would claim that if you did a few simple things, your church would grow. Those things included: expand the size of your parking lots, remove all symbols of the cross lest people be turned off, pastors should dress casual but stylish, sermons should be practical, simple, humorously light-hearted with no theological jargon, worship music should reflect the tastes and preferences of the target age group the church is trying to reach, offer high quality coffee should be available before, during, and after the worship event, by all means, have high internet access available so people can react to the worship event in real time via Facebook, Twitter, instant messaging, etc.; provide as many different services throughout the week as possible: convenient daycare, aerobics classes, bookstores, MOPS groups, after school activities....well you get the point.

Well, only if Jesus had known the wisdom of the church growth movement. Maybe we wouldn't have the latter half of John 6. If only the Lord would have continued to feed the crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children, with more bread and fish as they wanted, things would have turned out better. The Jews would not have grumble at Jesus after He claimed to be the bread that came down from heaven (vs. 41, 51). Or maybe the Jews would not have been so scandalized after He said, (vs. 53), "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." And it's quite possible that the final straw was what Jesus said in vs. 65, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

The end result of such strong language is found in vs. 66, "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him (i.e., Jesus)." His followers are leaving; hence, the Lord's church shrinkage program. And what's even more shocking is what Jesus says to the 12 disciples, "Do you want to go away as well?" And it

appears the Lord was ready and willing for them to say yes. All this happens because Jesus had the audacity to teach the deep things of His kingdom, all because He wasn't content to leave them with full stomachs but starving souls.

Jesus desires to give His people more than the immediate needs of the body. There's nothing wrong with people having good coffee and convenient parking at church, or receiving practical guidance from Scripture, or free wireless internet (St. John's has it by the way, but I would prefer you not to use it!), etc. But what is unacceptable is for people to have their physical needs and wishes met but leave the church with impoverished souls and minds bound by the futile, deceptive philosophies and teachings of this fallen world.

The events of John 6, which we have been following over the past month now, have been growing in ever increasing intensity and have now reached their climax. It began with Jesus feeding the crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children, with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Using that event of the backdrop, Jesus taught the crowd (and us, His Church) not to seek the food that perishes but the bread of life. He is the bread of life. The grumbling soon began. Jesus pressed the image of eating even further when He said, "I am the living 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" (vs. 51).

That statement pushed the crowd past grumbling to out-right argumentative anger. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (vs. 52) And let's be open and frank. It's a tough saying. And Jesus doesn't soften it, rather He intensifies it all the more (vs. 53-54), "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. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." Eternal life, life with God, that spiritual hunger that all people have for transcendence, purpose, and ultimate meaning, can only be found and satisfied by consuming, eating the flesh and blood of Jesus.

In other words, either eat the flesh and blood of Jesus and participate in His life or starve unto eternal death and misery. That's the hard saying of today's gospel. And it's quite likely one of the most difficult in all of the gospels. For we must ask ourselves what it means to eat the flesh of Jesus and drink His blood. And believe me, Christians have been discussing and debating the meaning of these words for 2,000 years.

Is Jesus speaking here of the Lord's Supper where we receive His body and blood through bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins? This is an area of much debate, by the way. I am convinced that the Lord's Supper is certainly included in our Lord's teaching and that the Lord's Supper is the most visible, tangible means of consuming the flesh and blood of Jesus for the life and salvation of sinners. But I do not think Jesus is referring only to the Lord's Supper.

To be sure, these words mean that we must find in Jesus, in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father's right hand, the only source and substance of forgiveness, grace, divine love, and eternal glory. Using the most vivid and powerful language imaginable – consuming flesh and drinking blood – our Lord is declaring that we must have faith in Him and only Him. This all-consuming faith trusts that Jesus is truly who He says He is and that He gives all that He promises to give for our eternal flourishing. That faith is the primary message underlying the image of eating and drinking is found in what Jesus says in vs. 63–64, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh (that is, our sinful, human flesh) is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.”

Having faith in Jesus and eating His flesh and drinking His blood are the same thing described in different ways. The Lord Jesus would not leave us wondering as to the remarkable and uncompromising nature of salvation unto eternal life. He, and He alone, is the Savior of the world. He brings you to the crossroad of unbelief and faith. You either follow Him in faith with all that means, with all the claims He places upon you or you turn away in unbelief. It is the crossroad we face, first of all, as individuals, and then collectively as a church.

I believe the Church in America is at this crossroad of faith and unbelief. The Church has more significant things to consider than coffee, parking lots, aerobics, and nice pastors. She is already having to decide whether she will follow the Lord Jesus with all the hard teachings of His cross or follow the easy, broad way of modern dogma which rejects and condemns all truth claims but its own. It's almost as if the Lord's words to His would-be Jewish disciples are being asked again of us would-be American disciples, “Do you want to go away as well?”

It runs deeper than gay marriage, though that is the most recent and perhaps most obvious event which signals the decisions we must make as Christians. It runs deeper than cohabitation, sexual ethics, or debates about the propriety of contraceptives.

When an organization's leadership, such as Planned Parenthood, which is supported by our government through our tax dollars, can casually discuss over wine and cheese the selective dismemberment of unborn children for the purpose of profit in the name of research, we are in the deep waters of debauchery and barbarism of the worst kind. Numerous other issues can be discussed. But we are increasingly being required to determine if we'll follow Jesus or turn away.

Those two responses to Jesus' hard sayings are found in today's gospel reading. The first has already been discussed to some extent and is exemplified in vs. 66, "many of the disciples turned back and no longer walked with Jesus." The other response is found in vs. 68–69, "Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'"

That is the response I believe is to be found here among you. The response that says, "Jesus, there is no other person to go to that can give us the words of eternal life. You are God's Son and our Savior. You are the conqueror over death and the grave. As you live, so shall we live. As your kingdom prospers, so shall we prosper. You are the fulfillment of all human desires and loves. Lord, to whom shall we go? There is no other. We will stay with you unto eternal life."

The Lord Jesus sustain all of you in your most holy faith as you feast upon Him with joy and salvation unto the glories of His eternal kingdom.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.