

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
August 23, 2015

Suppose you're looking to buy shoes, where might you go to find them? Maybe a shoe store, a department store, or online. If you need a high quality recipe, what would you do? You could talk to a friend, go to a cookbook, or go online. Now, if you want to figure out if that weird skin thing is something to worry about or not, where would you turn? Maybe you'd turn to a doctor, a friend, or... online. (Although if you're anything like me, looking online almost certainly means I'll diagnose myself with a terminal illness. So, I'm learning to avoid that "online" answer for medical advice.) Finally, if we want to experience God, where do we look? Before we give some quick answers, like "look online", let's dwell on that question today. "Where do we look to experience God?"

In today's Gospel reading we finally get to the end of a long episode in John known as the "bread of life" discourse. We've been exploring this discourse in our Gospel readings for weeks now. It all started when Jesus fed the 5,000, and then Jesus went on to explain that miracle – and boy was there a lot of explaining. Jesus explains that he is the bread from heaven, and now we are told to eat Jesus's flesh and drink his blood. It's kind of weird.

As Christians we get the allusion that Jesus is talking about communion, even if John's Gospel has no Last Supper story. Yet, to the Jewish folks following Jesus, the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood was blasphemous – for observant Jews did not drink the blood of animals as it was forbidden by Levitical Law. Sure, flesh alone could be eaten – it's what some of us eat to survive. It's that big bird at Thanksgiving, it's that lamb at Passover, it's a delicious taste for carnivores, but blood? No, blood to Jewish folks was the essence of life. To drink blood was to drink the life of another. So Jesus makes an offensive statement by asking folks to eat his body and drink his blood. He asked them to literally consume who he was as a person, he's asking them to become himself.

As a result people, well no not just people, rather disciples, disciples turned away from Jesus. Here we see some disciples tell Jesus: "Bye, Felicia," "It's over," "See ya!" So, I wonder why they respond that way?

Why *do* these disciples leave? After all they've followed him into the desert numerous time. They've watched him, they've been waiting and wondering and worrying. But sometimes we humans grow tired. It's just one too many things. Perhaps it became hard to understand why they were following Jesus who equates himself with providing bread like Moses, who wants them to eat his flesh and blood, and who argues that he is divine bread from Heaven. Come on, at some point, people are going to say enough is enough, you cray Jesus.

And really, I don't think I can blame them. Are we any different than them? Have you ever wondered if you really believe in God? At the moment when a loved one is nearing

death, doesn't it cross mind? Or how about when you read about a child caught in the crossfire of gun violence. Or that late night when you are now walking alone after your significant other has left you. Or maybe when you cook a meal for your family, your family that is filled with ill-will and anger towards each other. Don't you sometimes wonder why things haven't turned out the way you hoped?

It's those moments when we look at the world and wonder about this life. We wonder where is the God who makes things right or who helps everything make sense. And so we subconsciously or consciously stop praying, the church doesn't seem all that important - so attendance and giving ceases, and eventually the slow fade is complete and we disappear.

The theologian David Lose notes that image of the fading disciples isn't a pretty picture in the Gospel today, but it's pretty accurate.¹ However, that isn't the only image for today. For in that place there remains the twelve disciples. Jesus says to them, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answers, "Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Now let's be careful here. It's easy to write off those disciples abandoning Jesus "as foolish or faithless unbelievers, it is even easier to imagine Peter and the rest as flawless faith giants." We must remember that in each and every Gospel the disciples were the ones who we haunted by doubt and fear, they suffered from abundance of pride and lack of courage, and the twelve deserted Jesus, when he needed them most. "So if they aren't smarter, or more faithful, or more courageous, or in short, any better than the rest of Jesus' disciples- then or now -then what sets them apart" David Lose asks.

One thing is this, hear it again, Peter says, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." You see, Peter knew where to look. That is the difference. Peter isn't different because of his brains, those twelve disciples don't have a different ability or status or faith, rather, they simply know where to look.

And we also know where to look. For God's presence is in the sacraments and this is the one place we look, it's the one place we know that God is there. In the waters of baptism and in the bread and wine of communion - there in those places we *know* God is always present.

David Lose makes a great point about this when he says, "Now here I want to be most clear. This is not to say that God is not at work in other places in the world. My word, ... as believing Christians we confess that this world simply pulses with the presence and activity of its creator: in nature, of course, but also in government, and family, in the work you do and the benefits you receive from the work of others, in our gathering together as families and as a family of faith. In all these places and more God continues to be both present and active creating and sustaining the whole creation.

And yet...and yet each of us knows just how difficult at times it can be to see God in these places. When nature turns violent or government goes corrupt, when the family is a place of discord and the church one of division, when all the things we usually count on come up empty and we no longer know where to turn, then we may hear the sacraments

¹ All quotes are from: <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-13-b/>

calling us back to see God clearly at work for us through water, bread, and wine, combined with God's mighty word of forgiveness, acceptance, and life.

Writing in the midst of a controversy about the nature of the sacraments, Martin Luther says very much the same. [Luther writes,] "Although [God] is present in all creatures...and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there, he does not wish that I seek him there apart from ...the Word, and [thereby] cast myself into the fire or the water, or hang myself on the rope. He is present everywhere, but does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope, rather, where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of him in the right way" (LW 36:342).

"Grope where the Word is." What a vivid way to emphasize the importance of the sacraments, as they tell us not simply that God is present in general, but that God is present particularly and personally *for us!*" The sacraments tell us that when we can't seem to grasp God anywhere else, "woop there it is."

This is exactly why we baptize in our worship services and we don't do mass baptisms with huge hoses of water, but rather we do it in personalized baptisms that emanate the promise of Christ through water and the Word. This is also why we have communion every single Sunday, no exception. There is the bread and wine, and there gathered at the table are folks of different races, sexual orientations, genders, neighborhoods, abilities, ages, and beliefs in God - it is there we gather knowing without a doubt that God is present.

On this day we welcome five new members into this community of faith. Five folks who proclaim through their actions, "Lord... you have the words of eternal life." Katy, Ellie, Cathi, Jamie, and Jeannie become members of this church today. I pray that each one of them knows that in our work together we'll catch glimpses of God through things like volunteering with The Night Ministry or on Sunday mornings as a lector. Maybe we'll see God at Arts Sanctuary or Brew & Bible. Yet, we're all grounded in our faith knowing that we look for God and find our God in the sacraments each Sunday. And as this church celebrates its 136 anniversary this Tuesday, we know we're grounded in what has given direction to this church for many generations.

Dear friends, I know that our faith is odd at times. We know we can see our God all around us in the world. Yet in those moments of struggle, in those times of doubt we gather together here. In this place we know where to look. We gather to eat bread and drink wine. We gather to be sprinkled with water. We gather to see our God for certain. We gather saying, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." Amen.