

## Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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When I started seminary four years ago, I learned a lot of new words: *Eschatological*. *Pneumatology*. *Exegesis*. *Hermeneutics*. (Not to mention all the Greek and Hebrew vocabulary I memorized.) It doesn't really matter if you know what any of those words mean. There are days *I'm* not sure *I* even know what they mean.

There's one word I learned, though, before classes even started: *YAGM*. Now, some of you might actually know this one. Four years ago, I definitely did not. *YAGM*. I couldn't even begin to guess. But as it turns out, *YAGM* is not even a word at all. It's an acronym, short for "Young Adults in Global Mission." Y-A-G-M. *YAGM*.

Before seminary, a few of my new classmates had just come from a year living and working abroad through this program of our denomination, the ELCA, that places young people from across the country into new and unfamiliar contexts to live and work alongside our partners in the gospel in the ELCA's companion churches and organizations.

This past week, I've had the delight to serve as the event coordinator for *YAGM* Orientation. It has been inspiring and encouraging to see nearly 80 young adults from across our church descend on Chicago for a week-long orientation ahead of their year of service in various countries around the globe. And the premise of their work, as any *YAGM* will tell you, is *accompaniment* — the idea of *walking together*, to work alongside, to accompany, to bear the good news of Jesus Christ, the message of liberation for the oppressed, in our *bodies*.

Oftentimes, the church is called *the body of Christ*. It's an idea that medieval Christian mystic and saint Teresa of Ávila captured in her short poem:

*Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world...*

We, the church, are the body of Christ for each other and for the sake of the world.

Teresa understood that we carry in our bodies the same work and compassion and blessing that Jesus embodied. ***Indeed, we the church are, quite literally, the very body of Christ for each other and for the sake of the world.***

In Jesus's words: ***The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.***

What began as the feeding of the five thousand, a miracle of abundance, has become something *more*.

Jesus's society was a society living under the occupation and oppression of the Roman Empire, a society that privileged the few at the expense of the many, a society plagued by food shortages and insecurity, malnutrition, and disease. Scarcity, not abundance, was the order of the day. In the midst of this scarcity and oppression, Jesus recognizes a deep hunger for bread and *more than bread*. Jesus offers loaves of bread in abundance, and then he makes the stunning declaration: *I am the bread of life*.

The bread that Jesus offers is more than bread. It is indeed *life itself, abundant* life in the midst of scarcity. The bread that he offers is indeed *his very self* — the eternal Word of God who became flesh and entered into our reality, the grit of human existence, the great I AM who crosses thresholds and subverts boundaries and draws all people to himself and calls them *friends*.

***The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.***

Here, in this place, we hear this Word of Life and are fed by the Bread of Life. If there's any truth the phrase "you are what you eat," it's here: Around this table, we become what we receive — the body of Christ, raised up for the world. We are the body of Christ for the sake of each other, bread for a world so desperate for the promise of life abundant.

Gunilla Norris writes these words in her poem "Plenty":

*Having shared our bread,  
we know that we are  
no longer hungry. It is enough*

*that you see me for myself.  
That I see you for yourself.  
That we bless what we see*

*and do not borrow, do not use  
one another. This is how we know  
we are no longer hungry... that*

*the world is full of terror, full of beauty  
and yet we are not afraid to find solace here.  
To be bread for each other. To love.*

*To be bread for each other... To be the body of Christ for each other...*

***The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.***

*We are that bread, friends.* In this thing called church, we are continually feeding and being fed by each other, having been fed first by the one who calls us and draws us to himself.

Just prior to YAGM Orientation this past week, I spent several days at a retreat of my own, a gathering of about 70 openly LGBTQIA+ Lutheran deacons, pastors, and seminarians who are all a part of Proclaim, an organization of nearly 300 of us in all. In worship, over meals, in discussions and fellowship with friends and colleagues, this is one of the highlights of my year. The Proclaim Gathering is always a time of rest and sabbath and being fed by our community, but this year especially: We gathered together from many places. Daily we heard the Word of Life and tasted the Bread of Life. In our time together, we were fed, by Christ, by each other, refreshed and revitalized, in order to feed others, sent forth to bear witness to the promise of abundant life in a world so desperately in need of that good news.

*There is joy and community at this table.* At YAGM Orientation opening worship, we literally *danced* as the altar furnishings and communion bread and wine were brought forward. *At this table, whether at YAGM or Proclaim or Wicker Park Lutheran Church, God forms us into a beloved community, sent to accompany God's people in this broken, beautiful world.*

*Jesus says: **The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.***

*We* are that bread, and *we* are that flesh. We are the body of Christ raised up for the life of the world. Indeed, we are bread for each other.