

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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August 26, 2018

Here we are, one final week in John's gospel before going back to Mark. I am excited to switch back to Mark. I find that John's gospel is more confusing and can easily be misunderstood. For example, a superficial reading of today's gospel could easily support an argument that Christians are cannibals. But let's be careful not to miss the forest for the trees. To better see the forest, it's important for us to remember why John was written. That's why you have an infographic in your bulletin from the good people over at The Bible Project.¹ In the top left, we can see the intention of the Gospel writer. The objective was to lead us to the belief that Jesus is the Messiah, and that by believing, we may have life in his name. So, all this talk about bread over the past few weeks was to help illumine one of John's main questions, namely "what does it mean to truly live?"

¹ <https://www.dropbox.com/s/i4vmsahz8wrhu4y/John%20-%20The%20Gospel%20Project%20Infographic.pdf?dl=0>

In our world, there are many opinions on what “true living” looks like. Some argue for pursuing happiness. Others look to explore and experience the world. Still some look to have the most coveted home, the largest 401(k), or to harness unlimited power. Yet, in John’s gospel, Jesus reminds us that “true life” is not found in a faraway place, but rather it’s found at a washbasin. You see, the defining moment that describes “true life” in John’s gospel is what we recall on Maundy Thursday. You can see it in chapter 13 on the infographic. It’s when Jesus washed the feet of the twelve and gave the “great commandment.” You see, our God holds that “true life” is found in acts of loving generosity and self-giving love. And, to be clear, love is not a feeling in the New Testament; rather, love is a way of treating people. Love is seeking the well-being of others regardless of their response.²

So, it’s little wonder that the disciples in verse 60 said, “This teaching is difficult.” After all, when Jesus calls us to “eat his flesh and drink his blood” he is encouraging us to emulate his manner of living. We are urged to seek the well-being of both Donald Trump and Rahm Emmanuel regardless of how they respond. We are called to loving acts of generosity toward the welfare recipient, undocumented immigrant, and unemployed worker. We are implored to follow Jesus’s actions to feed the hungry, to make whole the sick, and to have compassion for all.

² <https://thebibleproject.com/all-videos/word-studies/>

It's no surprise that the many disciples following Jesus reacted in different ways. After all, the bread Jesus offered and the bread that we are invited to become seems stale and crusty. This bread does not taste life-giving; instead, it seems tiring. So, many disciples began to complain (verse 61), some were in disbelief (verse 64), some rejected the bread (verse 66), and, if we kept reading, we'd see that some betray Jesus (verse 71).

But it's not just *those* disciples, we also respond similarly. We'd rather focus on ourselves, our sole needs, and our future rather than put in the work of self-giving love. After all, why would we care about a living-wage for factory workers in Bangladesh when we can get cheap clothing? Why would we spend more money for sustainable energy when we can get cheap carbon-emitting power? Why would we make something harder for ourselves to ease the burden on the far-off family and an unborn generation? Yes, Jesus's teaching *is* difficult.

Yet, there are moments when we glimpse "true life." There are times where we, like Peter, acknowledge that this bread is the gift of eternal life for all. Far too often we want to believe that "eternal life" is something that we individually receive. We want to pretend that it's the certificate of completion after a life well-lived. But maybe, just maybe, eternal life is more than something off in the distance. What if eternal life is about reflecting Jesus's life? What if we see the act of caring for those who wish us ill as "eternal life?" What if "eternal life" is emblematic of justice for women, immigrants,

and queer people? What if “eternal life” is advocating for peace between Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Christians across the globe? Then maybe, just maybe, we might see that this “bread of life” is, indeed, “bread from heaven” and that no other bread will suffice.

That reminds me of story about Dawn’s immigrant grandmother. Being from Italy, Dawn’s grandmother would frequently point to the loaves of bread at the local supermarket. She’d ask her granddaughter, “Why do people eat-a these things? They have-a no taste.” She would go on to say that life was too short to eat anything but good bread, to drink anything but good wine. So, it was little wonder that Dawn spent nearly every Saturday of her childhood making bread, pizza, and pasta. “Why settle for bread that is not bread,” Dawn says, and, so too, why settle “for life that is not life.”³

That, my friends, is what it’s all about. It’s about glimpsing God’s vision of true life. It’s about discovering that self-giving love is the pathway to eternal life. And once your life has been transformed by God’s gift of love, you’ll yearn for this “bread of life,” you’ll beg for this “bread from heaven,” and you’ll walk with joy to this “table of grace.” For once you taste God’s gift of true life, once you realize what it means to truly live, then you won’t want anything else. Amen.

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³ Wilhelm, Dawn. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word*. “Proper 16: John 6:56-69.” Year B. Vol 3. p385.