

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”*⁵² *Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”*⁵³ *Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”*⁵⁴ *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.*⁵⁵ *For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.*⁵⁶ *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.*⁵⁷ *Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.*⁵⁸ *This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.”* (John 6:51-58)

Eat this Bread!

Have you ever had to eat something you didn't like? When I was a soldier in Germany, several times a year the synod held retreats for the WELS military families that were stationed over there. One year at Easter we gathered in a small hotel and in the evening they served fresh trout. Now fish is a funny thing. I love it. But one of my best friends – who is a pastor today, but was also in the army in Germany then – absolutely hates it. Well, he came to this retreat, too. And when he tells the story, he emphasizes the fact that they put the whole fish on your plate, and the eyes were there looking up at you. He also points out it was just before pay day and he was too broke even to go MacDonalD's. So he had to eat what they served. Does that fish, there on the plate with the eyes staring up at you, sound good or gross to you? I loved it. I wanted more. But my friend had a different reaction. We haven't come here today to tell our favorite fish eating stories. But we have come to talk about eating bread. Today, Jesus' Bread of Life Discourse reaches its climax. In this section, Jesus pushes this picture to an extreme that may even sound gross and to make a point: **eat this bread.**

I.

Now, that point isn't surprising, since we've spent the last three weeks studying this Bread of Life Discourse. Jesus is the bread of life. But today, Jesus makes that point as sharp as he can: **eat this bread and live!**

Last week we pointed out that Jesus is the bread that gives life. That's very much the point here. But Jesus also adds another thought. He says, **“I am the living bread that came down from heaven.”** Why does he give life? Because he is alive himself. The life he gives us is the life he has in himself. He says, **“If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.”** But then comes the real head scratcher. He says, **“This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”** The Jews who heard this statement immediately asked how could he say that. But Jesus insisted, **“I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.”**

Now what does all that mean? As Lutherans, our first instinct may be to talk about communion. After all, in communion we do eat the body of Christ and drink his blood. But is that what Jesus is talking about here? The truth is, it's not. This was at least a year before Jesus said, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.” The people who were listening to him that day did not have communion to think about yet. When Jesus did say those words on the night he was betrayed, those words were totally unexpected by his disciples. So that's not what he was talking about here.

Further, Jesus says that if you don't eat his flesh and drink his blood, you won't get to heaven. The Bible never says that about communion. If we had to take communion to get to heaven, then we had better start communing our preschoolers, just in case something terrible happens to one of them. Truly, if you believe in Christ but never have the chance to come to communion, you will still reach heaven. The opposite is just as true. Jesus says that if you eat his flesh and drink his blood, you have eternal life. But you don't automatically go to heaven if you commune. In fact, St. Paul warns us about the danger to our faith if we commune in an unworthy fashion. He says that we receive judgment instead of forgiveness. Finally, that could mean that a person who eats the body of Christ and drinks his blood in communion goes to hell.

Finally, Jesus uses a totally different vocabulary here than he uses in connection with communion. He says flesh and blood instead of body and blood. That's a hint. And even though it's not very obvious in

English, Jesus uses a different word for “eat” here to. Twice, the NIV translates it as “feed on.” The idea behind the word is chewing or biting. One professor I had talked about “gnawing” on his flesh. Jesus uses a very graphic word, a word that emphasizes the working of the teeth and jaws. He never does that with communion, because the eating of communion isn’t about the body processing the bread and wine.

For all those reasons, Jesus is not talking about communion here. So what is he talking about? Faith. If we don’t believe, we won’t get to heaven. If we do believe, we will. That really is the reason why Jesus uses this graphic language. He’s trying to provoke an emotional response – to many people, the idea of gnawing on his body and slurping down his blood sounds revolting. Jesus tells us that we need to gnaw on his flesh and drink his blood or we won’t get to heaven. What does that mean? What does it mean to eat the bread of life? It means to take it – to take Jesus and his teaching – inside ourselves. Faith is more than just being able to recite some facts. In catechism class, I teach a lot of doctrinal facts. I teach the kids dozens of terms and what we do and don’t believe. And I expect them to be able to reproduce that information on tests. But we must all realize that faith is more than being able to regurgitate definitions on a test. It’s much more than being able to stand up here on examination day and give me the right answer to a question.

Faith is trusting in that answer. That does mean you have to have the right answer. You do have to know the doctrinal facts. You have to know that God promises to take care of us in order to trust that promise. And if your pastor makes you learn the word “providence” to mean the way God takes care of us, that’s gravy. But faith is clinging to that promise when life is hard and it doesn’t feel like God is taking care of us. When my doctor tells me he’s found cancer, when I have to go home and tell my spouse that I got laid off, when I feel lonely and wonder if I’m ever going to have friends or a spouse – whenever it’s hard to see what God is doing, faith seizes the promise and trusts it. And the ultimate promise that faith clings to is the promise of eternal life. No matter how much this life hurts, no matter how much my conscience torments me because I keep failing to live up to God’s standards, Jesus is my Savior. He died and he rose for me. God has washed all my sin away. God has promised that I will live with him forever in perfect joy.

To drive home how important that is, Jesus told us that we need to gnaw on his flesh and drink his blood. We need to chew on it, to take it seriously and spend time on it. We need to be focused on this teaching and take it inside ourselves. When we do, we will live forever. That’s his promise. Now, as we said last week, that faith is a gift that God creates inside us. But now that we have faith, now that he has done that miracle, it is our responsibility to dedicate our time and our attention to that message of life and forgiveness. God does command us who believe to gnaw on that bread of life for our own spiritual good.

Do we do that? Do we dedicate our lives to making Jesus’ promises and teachings a real part of who we are? Are we happy to gnaw on them? I hope we do. But even though I’ve been a pastor for almost twenty years and a Christian for as long as I can remember, I have to admit that there are times when I don’t. Sometimes, I don’t find theology interesting – at least not as interesting as a lot of other things I could read or watch or talk about. Sometimes I’m too lazy to gnaw on Jesus’ words. Sometimes it’s too easy to make faith all about what I know rather than what I trust. Is that true about you too? If it is, then what Jesus says here today is for you. Because he says that the bread of life is his flesh which he will give for the world.

II.

The cross stands at the heart of all that Jesus did and taught. He died there because we Christians deserve to die and go to hell because so often we don’t take his words nearly seriously enough. But he did die. And then he rose. That body came back to life because he had paid all that we owe. When he rose God was promising us that we will rise on the last day, that we will avoid all punishment, all hell, that we will live in heaven when we die. Jesus wiped away our laziness and our disinterest and our failure to gnaw on his words. Gnawing on Jesus’ flesh is nothing more or less than meditating on that teaching and what it means for us. It’s coming back again and again to eat this bread. And when we do that, Jesus promises us one of the most mysterious blessings in all of Scripture. My friends, **eat this bread and be one with Christ.**

That’s what Jesus said: **“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.”** When I eat something, it’s inside of me, right? I’m not inside of it. When I have a nice steak for Sunday dinner, some cow is at least partially inside of me. While some of that cow will remain – the protein will become muscle, the nutrients will enter the bloodstream, there’s no part of me inside that cow. But Jesus says that if we gnaw on his flesh and drink his blood, we the eaters will remain in him. So taking him into ourselves

and making him and his promises a part of us, makes us a part of him. And, just so we aren't any more confused, he is also inside of us, because we did take him in.

What is Jesus talking about? Sometimes, we call it the Mystic Union. It's the idea that God joins a Christian to himself by faith. The Bible talks about it in several different ways. Perhaps the easiest one for us to grasp is that God lives in our hearts by faith. In a spiritual way – so in a way that we cannot fully grasp here – faith links us to Christ. He penetrates us, he comes into our hearts and our minds and is a part of all that we think and feel and do and say. Even though we do still sin, we are different than we would've been if we were only sinners. A new believer lives in us and he communes with Christ. And so we are in Jesus. In another chapter, Jesus says that if we remain in him and he is us, we will bear much fruit. So the power to live a Christian life, the power to redirect our thoughts from sin to Christ, the desire to be new and different people, all that comes from Christ dwelling in us.

Jesus compares our relationship to him with his relationship to the Father. He says, **“Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.”** God the Father, the source of all life, sent Jesus into this world. Jesus lives because of the Father. That's an incredibly deep statement. Jesus is begotten of the Father. Even though he's always existed, he is God's Son and he lives because he was born of the Father. And Jesus entered this world and became a living human being because the Father sent him here to live and die and rise for us. Just as the Father gave birth to the Son and sent the Son, so also the Son gives life to us, who feed on him. We could not live spiritually without him. But with him, we are alive right now. Right now, we trust all those promises of life to come and love and care and every other promise you can point to in the Scriptures. Right now we rejoice in those promises. That's life. And when we die, our souls will live while our bodies turn to dust. That's life. And when Jesus returns, he will call us out of the grave and renew our bodies and our world and we will live with him forever. That will be life to the fullest.

We have it all because Jesus lives. He died. He rose. He conquered death for us. We have it all because we feed on him. God gave us faith and that faith takes all God's promises into us and makes it part of who we are. We have it all because Jesus lives in us and we in him. We are connected forever to the one who gives us life. That is a wonderful mystery. Gnaw on that bread of life! Amen.