

Sermon Notes – August 11, 2024
The Holy Gospel of St. John 35: 41-51
Peace Lutheran Church
“The Bread Jesus Gives”

The most contentious liturgical divide where I do a lot of ministry arises in the parish hall, at the times when we sing “Be Present at Our Table, Lord.” You could say there are two camps; those who always want to be strengthened for service, and those who want to feast in paradise. Even at a funeral lunch, there are those who feel that it is rather indulgent to focus on the eternal feast.

Of all the things Jesus promises us as our living bread - sustenance, presence, love - the one that is both the most weighty and the most troublesome is this: eternal life. For many it is troublesome simply because it is hard to talk about eternal life without also talking about death.

Except for the bloodbaths that are regular features in Hollywood movies, death is mostly out-of-sight-out-of-mind for modern people. We live removed from the slaughter of animals that become our food, removed from the care of bodies as they die and are buried, removed from the reminder of our own mortality. Those who live more closely to their own deaths, as when experiencing acute illness, find themselves speaking of living in another country apart from the rest of us.

But no one in the biblical world could be too far from the reality of death. Elijah, in his moment of spiritual exhaustion, has come from a battle that was both his prophetic triumph and a slaughter. King David's victory in battle comes at the heartbreaking cost of losing his son. The people of Ephesus, living in a place of cultic worship and sacrifice to the goddess Artemis and, of course, Jesus' own faith practices, were shaped by regular offering of sacrifice in the temple, with the highlight of the ritual year featuring the blood of an unblemished lamb. Jesus' audience could not ignore the fact that our lives - both physical and spiritual - depend on the lives of others.

In suggesting that His flesh will be food that will never run out, Jesus is both speaking in terms that were familiar, and at the same time offering an utterly different take on what eternal life could mean. What if the cycle of sacrificing one life for another were to stop with his offering of Himself?

The idea of human life offered up for others has not stopped in modern times. From the ways we speak of the costs of war to stomach-churning science fiction, we human beings have not let go of the notion that a community's troubles and sins can be solved by human sacrifice. But Jesus never suggests we should replicate His offering of his flesh. With Him, the bloody mess comes to an end,

This end to the bloodshed is possible only because Jesus draws His own life continually from the Father's: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whosoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6: 51). Notice that all three tenses are here. The eternal living bread is from the past, is here in the present, and will raise us in the future.

Eternal life is the life of God, the life that Jesus shares with the Father and that he shares with us. The bread he shares with us is continuous with the manna shared in the wilderness, but God also feeds people in the present. The eternal life belongs already to those who eat His flesh and drink His blood. AND He will raise them up.

Our eternal life is held by God entering into death. AND so will we feast in paradise with Him - and with all who are before God, the living and the dead, the ones we have loved and the ones we struggle to forgive, And if we are in their presence too, we must be strengthened for service in this life.