

Which is He: Flesh or Bread?

12th Sun. after Pent. – 08/11/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: John 6:35-51 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 51, [Jesus said,] **“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”**

Introduction

⊗ As a very young boy, somewhere around 6-8 years old, I fondly remember our adopted grandmother. She was actually a widowed member of our extended family who took care of my widowed grandpa. We called her Grandma Thamert. One of the main reasons for my fond memories of Grandma Thamert is that it seemed like she always had fresh homemade bread for all of us cousins to snack on.

→ The smell was so inviting. And it tasted so good, especially with a healthy bit of real butter spread on top of it. But looking back, I think the main reason it was so good was that it was prepared, baked and given freely in love. Grandma Thamert put a lot of herself into taking care of us little rug rats, in spite of the messes we made and left for her to clean up after we left.

⊗ So it is with Jesus. For, when He gives us the Bread of Life, we learn here today that Jesus freely gives us Himself (v.51).

I. The Life Jesus Gives is More than Just Life

⊗ In verse 35, the extended story continues of Jesus miraculously increasing five small loaves of bread to feed more than 5000 and then teaching the people that He is so much more than just a free lunch ticket to fill our bellies. In today’s Gospel Reading Jesus makes a bold – even difficult statement for our limited human reason to fully grasp, “I am the Bread of Life; whoever comes to Me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst.”

→ The Bread of Life! Is Jesus telling us here that He is more than just the source of this earthly life that we have in this earthly body that He created? Because it sure sounds like He’s telling those living human beings in His day, and us living beings today that He has something more to feed to us beyond just earthly bread.

→ Verse 51 again, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.” Now, in our day, you and I know from the rest of God’s Word, what the people in front of Jesus couldn’t know quite yet. Jesus is talking, in advance here, about the cross, isn’t He?

⊗ Jesus gave nothing less than His entire fleshly life, on the cross – for the life of the world; both our earthly life here within His Church today and our resurrected life into eternity before His throne in heaven.

→ You see, this is ultimately “faith” talk, because to “eat the bread of life” as Jesus intends here can only be done through faith. It is believing in Jesus; believing in His invitation to “eat” in faith and believing that He is able to do what He promises and believing that it will actually come about.

→ “This is the will of My Father,” says Jesus in verse 40, “that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” When Jesus was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, he told his sister, Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die” (Jn. 11:25–26). Then Jesus asked her this very important question, “Do you believe this?”

✘ I think everyone agrees that homemade bread is so much better than store-bought bread; there is no comparison. But in a much grander comparison, life with Jesus, “the Bread of Life” is exponentially greater than life without Him. And it’s not just a matter of quantity, nor is it just eternal.

→ Both here and into eternity, it is also a matter of quality. Once you and I have life with and from the Bread of Life, the entire essence; the very nature of this life is changed and new. Even as we still face the corruption and struggle with sin; even as we still experience heartache and pain and even death, the way that we view and deal with those “facts of life” is entirely new and different, because now, Jesus has put Himself into it all. Now sin has lost its control because Jesus gives us His victory over sin. Now in heartache and pain we know Jesus intimately loves and cares for us. And death is no longer a thing to fear because Jesus has conquered it. His promise is absolute for everyone who believes, “I will raise [you] up on the last day” (v. 40).

✘ Yes, life with Jesus is no passing fad and so much more than what we can simply touch and taste. Yet, that’s all the people in front of Jesus in our text were thinking about. They still had the taste of the barley loaves and fish in their mouths from the day before. Maybe a few of the more pious ones were remembering the manna with which God fed their ancestors in the wilderness.

→ But, what Jesus had to remind them of in verse 49 was that their ancestors ate of that manna and they still died. Yes, they needed that manna to feed and strengthen their earthly bodies for the earthly tasks before them. But there is far more to this life than bread and butter or manna and quail; far more than all that we experience here in this world.

✘ God certainly provides for all of those physical and material things that we need. Jesus even taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” And Martin Luther explains in the Small Catechism that the “daily bread” we pray for is everything we need for this life.

→ But Jesus teaches us here that He came for so much more. He came as the source of eternal life; life in a relationship with God; life where our sins are forgiven; life that is full, abundant and forever.

✘ Jesus started His teaching on life by feeding the crowd with bread, just as God fed His people Israel in the wilderness with manna. Jesus did it as a sign; to make a point – the same point God made for His Old Testament people in the wilderness. Deuteronomy 8:3 says, “He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh.”

II. The Life Jesus Gives is Himself

✘ Well, dear Christians, Jesus is that Word. He is “the living bread that came down from heaven” (v. 51). In today’s Introit from Psalm 34:8 that we sang earlier, King David invites us to “taste and see that Yahweh is good!”

→ It is in Jesus, who declares His Triune part with Yahweh when He says, “I am the Bread of Life” that you and I are now able, through faith to “taste and see” how good our God and Savior really is.

→ Believing in Jesus means we now know and experience God; we now have fullness of life; we are blessed with a closeness and intimacy with God that is otherwise impossible. The broken, sin-filled, guilt-ridden, shameful and corrupt relationship we had with God before Jesus is now shattered because Jesus gave His flesh on the cross for us. Only Jesus could, and only Jesus has restored our relationship with God back to right and good; today and forever.

- ✘ In verse 39, Jesus said, “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me, but raise it up on the last day.”
 - ➔ “That I should lose nothing!” When Jesus declared later in John 10, “I am the Good Shepherd...” (vv. 11, 14) He said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (Jn. 10:27–28). You can’t be any more secure than that.
- ✘ And yet verse 41 here in today’s text says that “the Jews grumbled about [Jesus], because He said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven’.”
 - ➔ In verse 52, right after our text, the people ask in anger and disgust, “How can this man give us His flesh to eat?” They can’t let go of this earthbound, concrete way of thinking. They are unwilling to literally believe Jesus is the “Son of God” as He declared Himself to be one chapter earlier in John 5:25. And now they refuse to believe not only in His miraculous power to increase bread and fish, but also to accept His use of figurative speech.
 - ➔ But how often have we heard someone like a parent or grandparent say of a child, “I love him so much that I could eat him up”? We don’t overreact to that and accuse the speaker of cannibalistic intentions. Yet these people before Jesus, just like I’ve heard people accuse us Lutherans of being today, believed Jesus was calling them to be cannibals. They were unwilling to let Jesus be God. They were refusing to enter into a relationship where they could joyfully say, “We love Jesus so much that we could eat Him up.”
- ✘ Before we get too smug, pointing our accusing fingers at those grumblers, maybe we should each ask ourselves, “Do I grumble at, or about Jesus?” When I would rather be doing, watching, speaking or thinking something other than what Jesus has called me to be about now as His follower, do I grumble inside? Does my brain start trying to figure out a way that I can still believe and yet get what I want? Am I tempted to just say, “That’s it, I’m done with Jesus.” Or do I start searching for a church or belief system that will let me do what I want and still embrace the lie that “Jesus’ words in the Bible don’t really mean what they say.”
 - ➔ Doing that is “grumbling.” And grumbling is refusing to believe in Jesus – wanting something different than He gives or, worse, someone different than He is – and, thereby losing out on the life He freely gives and desires all people to receive in faith.
- ✘ Yet Scripture, centuries before Jesus came in the flesh, spoke just as Jesus did, “Taste and see that Yahweh is good” (Ps. 34:8) and in Psalm 119:103, “How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”
 - ➔ Jesus is the Bread of Life. He literally feeds your soul and mine in His Word. In fact, He is “the Word (of God) made flesh” (Jn. 1:14). When you and I are forgiven in the Words of Absolution, Jesus takes away all that stands against us; all that stands between us and God; all that separates us from God and He feeds us with everlasting life.
 - ➔ Jesus set His future believers up for what was to come; what we enjoy today, when He feeds us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. When He gathers us around His table, He feeds us nothing less than Himself. In the bread we feed on His flesh that He gave at the cross for our salvation, for we believe that His promise is literal and true, “This is My body...” given for you. In the wine, we drink in faith of which He said, “This is My blood...poured out...for the forgiveness of sins. (Mat. 26:26, 28)
- ✘ Paul reminds us of this life that Jesus feeds to us in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus. He says, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with Him” (Eph. 2:4–6). Pointing to our Baptism, he says in today’s Epistle Reading, “Put off

your old self ... and...be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and...put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. ...Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 4:22–24; 5:1–2).

➔ “A fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Not unlike the fragrant smell of homemade bread; prepared, offered and given in love. Jesus is the “bread of life”, prepared from eternity; made flesh by the love of the Father; given freely for the forgiveness of all sins; and fed to us all through His baptismal gift of faith.

➔ So, which is Jesus: flesh or bread? He is both in God’s love and grace so that you might have abundant life today and forever! Amen.