

## JOHN 6:51-69

*Pentecost 14, August 24-26, 2024*

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51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread 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, “Very truly I tell you, 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 them 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 them. 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 ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”

59 He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. 60 On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” 61 Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! 63 The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. 64 Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. 65 He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.” 66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 67 “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Jesus said this after he had fed the 5,000, and something like a whole year before he instituted the Lord’s Supper. So these words are not about the Lord’s Supper but about receiving, consuming and believing in Jesus as God and Lord. He is explaining the real meaning in the lesson about the manna in the days of Moses. It’s about faith.

The danger, and I don’t want to dwell on this, is that those who want to impose the Lord’s Supper into this passage, too often do so to try to disprove that the Lord’s Supper is a sacrament, or offers forgiveness, or is anything more than a memorial. Let’s leave our understanding of the sacrament where it belongs, which is in the passages that truly are about the Lord’s Supper, and not here.

The sin Jesus exposes is the resistance and unbelief that was right there in front of him. The Jewish leaders were turning more openly against him-- Pastor Scharf shared that lesson with us two weeks ago. But now, some of Jesus’ own followers, disciples, **began to turn away.**

Just as more and more people were rushing to hear him and to be healed by him, his own followers began to decide that this was all too hard.

**Jesus Christ did not live up to their idea of the Savior.** But hear how gentle he is with them! What simpler image could he possibly use than eating and drinking. “You need me. You need to trust in me. It’s like eating and drinking. If you don’t eat and drink, you starve and die. That’s physical food and water. Everyone knows that. I’m spiritual food: bread and water, and if you don’t consume me, you will not live.”

“Hundreds and hundreds of years ago,” Jesus goes on, “your own ancestors were with Moses, and they had nothing to eat in the desert. So what happened? My Father sent them manna, day after day, every day but the Sabbath day, for forty years. He told them: Trust me. The manna will always come. I will feed you. You don’t need any extra except the day before the Sabbath Day, so don’t hoard it. Don’t try to take extra. You don’t need it. I will give you each day your daily bread.”

But man does not like to rely on God. There are different ways of saying this: The sinful person wants **to pay for it**, the sinner wants to **do the ritual or ceremony**. The sinner wants to know **the boundaries and limitation** because sinners are always looking for loopholes. The sinner wants to create **restrictions** because we have the opinion that God should forgive me, but he shouldn’t forgive those other sinners. And maybe, man thinks, God doesn’t really know how sinful those people are. All of this is just another way of talking about **doubt** and about **unbelief**.

The Jews in the synagogue where Jesus was preaching asked, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” And his own disciples said that this was “too hard.” But Jesus raps the stone of his words and says: You can’t get past this. If you don’t consume me, all of me, then you don’t get the benefit of any of me. Unless you eat, **you will not live**.

And isn’t it just here where sinful man, sinful you and me, get stubborn? We clench the jaw, and make a fist, and tense up all of our muscles like we’re about to fight, forgetting all the while who it is we’re posing as we’re going to fight.

When I was in school, we had to take regular swimming classes as part of the school curriculum. And so a lot of my classmates and I got pretty far, and many became lifeguards. We were taught that if you really do find yourself with someone who is in danger of drowning, to be careful, because the human instinct is not to trust that someone will rescue you. Instinct says, “Here is a person I can climb on top of. If I send this person to the bottom, maybe I can stand on his dying body and be safe.” So in order not to die as a lifeguard, the

lifeguard must often overpower the drowning person, forcing them to be helpless, and therefore able to be saved.

This is always the case with sinners and sin. God must stop us from trying to save ourselves, to rescue ourselves. **He must pulverize our instinct to preserve our own souls**, because the sinful heart will always, always, always get it wrong. So Jesus continues his illustration of eating manna in the wilderness by saying: If you don't do this, if you don't consume me in faith and trust in me completely, you cannot be saved.

And yes, many of the Jews in the synagogue did not believe him. And some-- no, many-- of his disciples began at this moment **to turn away**. We don't know their names. Even when Jesus finally did institute the sacrament a year later, on the night he was betrayed, **there weren't even twelve anymore**. One last traitor left during the meal, saying even then: I have more important things to do.

But our Lord is compassionate. He is gracious. He holds out forgiveness even to sinners like you and me who tense up and fight him all the time. We break the law, we don't love as he would have us love, we don't -- we don't fear, love, and trust in him above all things. But he forgives, and he brings us back to his side, and by virtue of his boundless love, he makes us want to do all those things we sinned at by not doing.

And Jesus keeps up his comparison and his point. Remember how our ancestors at manna with Moses in the desert? The manna came down from heaven. They ate, and they lived, but their bodies died. Now something greater than manna has come. I have come down from heaven, sent by the Father. Consume me, put your faith in me and trust in all of me. **I'm something for you do devour whole, like a cake**. The flour, the sugar, the eggs, the milk, the frosting, the candles, the flame of everlasting life-- the entire birthday cake of the Messiah. And be assured (for Jesus speaks gospel to his flock, to us) that when you have one true bite of me, with trust and love and faith, you have the benefit of all of my grace and compassion and the death of my body for your sins. I live, and I will die, but I will rise again.

And Jesus also says here: "How about if you see me ascend back into heaven, the way Elisha saw Elijah ascend?" Jesus knew who believed in him and who didn't believe, just as he looks down now from his throne at the right hand of the Father and he knows who trusts in him, and he cares for each and every one of us, even though we're sometimes more **like a flock of sparrows** than a gentle herd of sheep. We're **jittery**, and easily frightened and scattered, and **we don't seem to be valued very much** by the world, so very much like sparrows. But our Father loves us.

So the Lord turned to his friends and said, “You don’t want to leave, too, do you?” He asks, because **he never twists any arms**. He has been hard on them and on us: Without me, you can’t be saved. But even so, he does not force us through the gates of heaven. He only invites; he only asks. And here, it’s not even “Will you follow?” but “Do you want to leave?” Our salvation depends entirely on him, and yet he still invites, he still welcomes, he still only offers his hand.

And it was Peter who spoke up for all of us: “Lord, to whom shall we go?” Peter calls him Lord to proclaim that Jesus is the same Lord God Almighty as the Father. And then he says the only correct conclusion: “Who else is there to follow? Who else is there for us to go to? **You have the words of eternal life.**”

Put your whole faith in Jesus alone. He is eternal life. Amen.