

August 5, 2018 Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

John 6:24-35

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the sixth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

²⁴When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were [beside the sea,] they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

²⁵When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” ²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” ³²Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

³⁵Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Today Jesus has gone from offering people miraculous bread, which he did in the verses just before this reading which we heard last week...to declaring that he, himself, is the Bread of Life. He answers people who are captivated by what seems like his magical ability to fill their empty stomachs...and tells them that he is about so much more than that...and bread has been at the center of our communal life ever since.

From Jesus’ declaration that we hear today...and then from the final meal he shared with his friends before he died, was born the sacrament we celebrate every Sunday...or almost every Sunday...and a few other days of the year besides. Over thousands of years the church has learned and taught and carried forward this sacred moment, where God comes so close to us that his body becomes a part of our own...and we become a part of God. We are, at our heart, a community that gathers for a meal.

I don't think we could overstate the power and importance of this moment if we tried...not if we take Jesus and the church at their word. It is no small thing to come to this table and share this bread.

And because of how important it is...the church has come to some very specific ways of trying to understand... and respect...what happens when God comes to us in this way.

Martin Luther's tradition – the Roman Catholic Church – teaches that the bread and wine of communion become truly the body and blood of Jesus. The fancy theology word for it is 'transubstantiation.' Some of us may have learned about this at one time or another.

And Lutherans teach this, too. We believe the exact how and when and why of this True Presence is a deep mystery, so we don't try to over-explain it. But this church carries on the teaching that Communion really is Jesus, present with us. His body and blood...given to transform us and to give us life. It is an powerfully beautiful...if also unsettling...belief.

And it can lead us to some pretty interesting questions. Like, if the elements of Communion are Jesus...what do we do if some of the elements of communion are dropped or spilled? And what do we do with what is left over?

Maybe let's think about that last one first. When it comes to leftovers, Luther gave some pretty simple basic guidance. "Eat it. Drink it," Luther says...because that's what communion is for. It is for us. Here today. Jesus comes in this way so the people can eat and drink and be changed. The eternal one enters this particular moment in time. This is God's particular presence, in this meal...and it is meant for this moment.

In Luther's time, sometimes people would try to keep the host instead of eating it...They would take it home and even worship it...captivated by the mystery of how it had become God. But...that missed the point, Luther said. It was meant to be consumed. Like the manna in the wilderness, if it was kept instead of eaten, it ceased to serve its purpose. It didn't draw us closer to God anymore if the thing, itself, got in the way. Incidentally, that is where the practice of the priest or pastor placing the bread or wafer directly into people's mouths comes from...if you've wondered...so people wouldn't try to keep instead of consume it.

But sometimes, there are still leftovers. So, if we don't finish it, what do we do? Well...here...we take it outdoors and return the things of the earth back to the earth.

Some people think that's silly and overly pious...Yes, it's Jesus...but it's also not magic...and we don't worship the bread and wine...we worship the God who is present in them. If God's purpose of feeding us is finished, no lightning would strike us if we poured it down the sink or threw it into the trash. And that may be true to a point. In some places, they are so careful, that they rinse the chalice and even drink the water it is rinsed with...and carefully collect every crumb, including any that might have fallen to the ground...and treat them with all the reverence of the holiest things. I was in a conversation recently where some people thought this was sort of absurd...to treat a breadcrumb as having such importance. And we certainly don't want to get confused about what we worship...It's about God first...and the means through which God is revealed second. And it's certainly not up to us in the end to be the guards or gatekeepers of what is holy. We can't protect God from the dirt and mess of this world, and God doesn't want us to. We can't control where God goes...or who or what God touches. Not at communion...and not ever. Any time we make worship more about what we are doing than what God is doing, we are missing the mark. And yet...the whole conversation made me wonder...how might it change us when we treat those crumbs with the reverence we reserve for God?

What if God is showing us how everyday things can be that holy? What might that mean?

Luther taught that we should remember our baptism always...even every time we wash our face...in the midst of our normal lives...any time we come across water. In his famous baptismal prayer, he wrote how through Christ's baptism, *all* the water of earth was made holy as a saving flood. It's why we don't have "holy water" in Lutheran churches. Not because we don't value the mystery of God's presence to us in water...but because all water is holy already. The phrase "holy water" has been rendered redundant.

Which makes me wonder...what if we thought the same way about bread? What if we do treat every last crumb and drop of communion with reverence? What if we all eat and drink it thoughtfully or bring it out to the earth when it is left over... not mindlessly dumping it down the drain or in the trash? And when we do, we can pause for a moment to meditate on how's God's presence really isn't just to nourish us...but all of humanity...and all of Creation. And then...what if we even thought about that with *every* piece of bread we saw. What if we remembered God's presence in *that* bread? What if we saw every piece of bread that was thrown away as an act of irreverence? What if we saw every chance to share bread as the chance to share God? What if we saw everything we do that keeps others from having enough bread as an act that treated them as if they didn't deserve access to God?

What if, when we wasted our bread, we thought about how we throw away God's grace? What if, when we polluted our water, we imagined ourselves throwing buckets of mud or poison into our baptismal font?

Maybe we shouldn't be less reverent about Holy Communion. Maybe we should be more reverent about it...and about everything and everyone else. Because today Jesus makes it very plain...He is inviting us to much more than a magic show. Jesus is inviting us and the world into transformation...into the life that is really life. To see ourselves and the world as God does...and to live accordingly.

I wonder how that might change us. I wonder how it already has.

And I pray we continue to find out.

Thanks be to God. Amen.