

“Lord, to Whom Shall We Go?”

John 6: 56-69

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Pastor Peter Hanson

Christ the King Lutheran Church

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Any of you ever hear that old piece of advice when you go out to a fancy restaurant and anticipate a wonderful meal: don't fill up on bread. There's more coming, save some room—don't fill up on bread. Turns out, that's pretty good advice for us, too.

As Pr Hannah said two weeks ago (and on the video intro today), there is more for us to taste and see, to crunch and munch, to take in, to digest, to know and to believe. Jesus' words “I am the bread of life” are familiar to many of us—and if they weren't before, they should be now, five weeks in—but still, as we hear in a slightly different way this week, even in this passage the disciples declare this to be a “hard saying.” While we might be saying that from the standpoint of feeling ready to move on to something else—to add a little more variety to our diet, as it were—Jesus disciples, both the 12 closest followers and the crowd that also tagged along from time to time, they are starting to actually take offense to what Jesus is saying. They are actually ready to bail on Jesus, as his words begin to hit home, as they begin to challenge them to think in a whole new way, to believe in a whole new way and yes, to begin to live in a whole new way.

A quick review of the gospel up to this point. Jesus performs the great sign by feeding the 5,000, miraculously doing so with only five loaves and two fish supplied by a boy whose faith speaks volumes to him. After that great and spontaneous meal, the crowds follow Jesus to the synagogue where he is teaching, wanting more bread, Jesus half-jokes, demanding another sign, something on the scale of Manna in the Wilderness back in the day. Jesus declares himself to be the new and improved manna, the bread of life for the whole world.

This is where he starts to lose the crowd. Yes, they liked the idea of Jesus providing miracle bread when they needed it—it's a image of God as a divine vending machine, dispensing manna on demand. Give us what we want, Jesus, when we want it, no strings attached. Beyond that, though, the crowd largely rejects the identification of

Jesus with manna. They find his words to be hard, offensive, even, and many of them turn away from him.

What is it about Jesus' teaching that they find difficult? Were they grossed out by all this talk of crunching and munching his flesh and drinking his blood? As Pr Joel pointed out, the early church *was* accused of cannibalism—and I know I'm not the only one feeling a bit queasy every time I've heard that phrase in the last four weeks.

More and more, biblical scholars tend to agree that the folks in the crowd are actually offended more by what Jesus is saying about himself. What they object to, what they call a hard saying is when he tells them that ***he is*** the living bread, that he is the one that brings nourishment and life, that he, in fact, is actually God, that in him God actually walks this road with us, that in Jesus God suffers and die... why people run away, don't believe, betray.

Think about it—just like in the original manna story, the people start out by praising Jesus as a great prophet to teaches eloquently and perform miracles among them, only to begin to grumble and complain about him later. What it boils down to is that just their ancestors before them, those in the crowd don't truly trust God to take care of them day after day after day. They actually don't believe what Jesus is saying. Like the Israelites, they have experienced God's abundance, abundance in miraculous proportions even, but still they can't quite fathom that will continue to provide for them. They don't trust God in Jesus Christ. They don't rely on Jesus enough to truly abide in him. Because "abiding" with Jesus is difficult—much more than giving a nodding assent to an idea or a proposal. Believing Jesus, trusting Jesus ABIDING in Jesus is a long process, one that can take an entire lifetime. Sure, like them, we'd all prefer easy answers, a quick fix, manna on demand, but along the way, like those first disciples, we need to learn that what Jesus is offering to any of us is not an easy path, in fact it is a long and winding road of discipleship. The difference is this: he promises to join us on the road. Actually, literally, physically God in Jesus Christ comes to us, joins us where we are. We don't walk alone. We

never walk alone.

This fall, we here at Christ the King have a unique opportunity to walk with Jesus and with one another along this long road of discipleship. We're just about to kick-off an all-congregation book study, taking a look together at the book "We Make the Road By Walking," by one of the leaders of the emerging church movement Brian McLaren. We've had a sort of pilot group meeting this summer, working through one of the book's four sections. Here's what one participant, Elaine Foells had to say about it: "I am intrigued by the concept of a yearlong book study which follows the church calendar. Our group started this summer with chapter 40 Pentecost and not at the beginning with chapter 1. [In the study guide] the first question at the end of every chapter asks what in the lesson intrigued, provoked, disturbed, challenged, encouraged, warmed, warned, helped or surprised you. Every week there is always something brought up by this question—and often there are as many things that challenge or disturb, as there are things that have encouraged or helped us. We've discussed the multidimensional love of Christ. We've been reminded that our neighbors are everyone and we need to find a way to co-exist. We have been challenged to think of "humankind" and not just *my* kind or *your* kind. We've learned how important—and how hard it is to appreciate and show gratitude for our different gifts we have been given. All of this in just a few short chapters. I'm ready to start another section."

Of course, this is only one way that we can move forward together with Christ on the road that is yet to be made. Beyond this particular ministry, this particular program, this particular book study there are countless ways that we can abide, that we can choose to stick with Jesus on the long road of discipleship. But I invite you, as we approach the beginning of another ministry year, to be intentional about how we walk this road together, and with whom. Like Joshua in our first reading, we can choose this day, and the next and the next, who we are going to serve. Like the 12 apostles in the gospel reading, we can abide with Jesus, adding our voices to those saying "where else would we go, Jesus? Only you have the words that bring eternal

life.” Like countless generations before us, we can remain, continue, persist, endure—even when the answers don’t come easily or when they don’t come at all, or when they don’t seem to be the answers we thought we were looking for.

A friend sent along a great article this week, one that spoke well about how it is that we abide in Jesus, even when bad things happen to us out of no-where. The author faced head-on that seemingly innocuous phrase that everything happens for a reason—a well-meaning phrase offered as a comfort, but which oddly enough tends to have the opposite effect. I’ve a link to the entire article on my twitter feed and I’ll get one onto the CtK website, but here’s the jist of it: in the face of things for which we struggle to find a meaning, it’s good to remember that “God’s will is not the path we walk, but rather how we walk the path. That *God’s will is not an event that happens to us, it’s how we respond to what happens.*”¹ God’s will for us is to walk with God through whatever we face. Through changes and uncertainties. Through the rejection. Through the abuse. Through the cancer. Through the death. God’s will is for us to draw close to God in the midst of pain. And eventually, God’s will is for us to use these life events—even the painful ones—to bring to other’s Christ’s message of hope, grace, forgiveness, and mercy.

May we find the faith to stick with Jesus even though his teaching is difficult. May we find the strength to abide, even when the going gets rough. May we discover the conviction to see in Jesus’ words a source of life, and then realize the courage within us to choose intentionally NOT to turn away from Jesus and his teaching. Standing together with Jesus, who is our manna, and listening to his words, May we find the faith, the strength, the conviction, the courage to respond, “to whom would we go, Jesus? Only you have the words of eternal life.” So, by all means, be sure to fill up on this bread. AMEN

¹ <http://www.feelingsandfaith.net/not-everything-happens-for-a-reason>, accessed August 22, 2015.