

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

JESUS IS THE BREAD OF LIFE

John 6:51-58

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Bruce K. Modahl

[Jesus said,] 51“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

52The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” 53So 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. 54Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

DIAGNOSIS: Eating Ourselves to Death

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Picky Eaters

Traveling through France be sure to know the French word for horse because it will be on the menu. And in Southeast Asia the street food tempting us may well be made from dog meat. Touring around Christian communities, residents will offer us Jesus’ body and blood as food and drink. According to the text, people objected saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Nowadays people object saying, “He didn’t really mean that.”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Empty Calories

People are put off by the menu but more by the claim accompanying it, "My flesh and blood are the means to eternal life, indeed, the life of the whole world." The man standing before them (and an ordinary man is all he is to them) and the bread and wine extended to us hardly look like the nutritional supplement we need. There are more obvious ways to secure the abundant life for ourselves. And when it comes to quantity of life, billionaires are investing their fortunes in scientific research to defeat death.

The problem is the effort to secure the abundant life for ourselves is never satisfied. We gorge on empty calories and are malnourished. As far as an indefinite extension of the quantity of life is concerned, I have walked the hallways of enough nursing homes to know better. My great aunt was not the only one rocking herself in her bed, repeating the mantra, "Take me Jesus," until the heavenly and long-overdue bridegroom finally came for her.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Starved to Death

There is a last day for the material order. On this the cosmologists agree with the theologians. Physicist John Stroeger claims that death and dissolution are written in the fabric of the universe. Since the meaning of any person or event is determined by its outcome, death strips meaning from not only our lives but from the very universe. Any purpose or meaning to life is left for us to create and pretend it makes a difference. We starve to death.

PROGNOSIS: Eating to Live

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): True Food and Drink

Jesus promises resurrection on the last day. He promises his

flesh for the life of the world. He promises resurrection into a different dominion. The new jurisdiction intersects the old in the person of Jesus.

The bread he gives for the life of the world is his flesh. His flesh is true food and his blood is true drink. He is not just this man as the crowd identified him. He is the Son of God who rose from the dead. His is not a spiritual resurrection but a real flesh and blood resurrection. He offers us the same resurrection on the last day and in the meantime he offers us abundant life, the life worth living.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Flourishing in Christ

“Take and eat; this is my body given for you. Take and drink; this is my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.” So it is Jesus abides in us and we in him. According to the Small Catechism, whoever believes these very words has what they declare and state, namely, forgiveness of sin. Furthermore, where there is forgiveness of sin there is life and salvation.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Living Because of Christ

Jesus said he was sent by his Father to offer the bread of life. So now we are those sent to proclaim Jesus Christ, the bread of life offered for the life of the world. All our ministry of Word and sacrament and service flows from the communion table.

When I think of the connection between the Eucharist and ministry in the world, I think of a small Lutheran church on the near south side of St. Louis. There was never much in the offering plates the ushers brought to the altar along with a flagon of wine. However, following the ushers, people came from the pews with offerings for the food pantry the congregation

operated on behalf of their struggling community. Canned goods, loaves of bread, and other staples towered over the offering plates. The flagon of wine nestled in the midst of the food. For the Lord's Supper the pastor always retrieved a few slices from one of the loaves of bread. It may have been over the top but he always chose a loaf of Wonder Bread. After worship we brought the food to the food pantry in the undercroft. On the appointed weekday the same people in worship served food to their neighbors.

We bring our offerings to God. God gladly receives them, blesses them, and multiplies them back into our hands for ministry to the world.