

Abiding

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34:9-14;
Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Would the servers please come forward”, the pastor of a Florida Presbyterian church announced. Mike, who was sitting in the congregation, knew this was his cue to go forward.

Mike was a thirty-something biker, who had lived a hard life with drugs and alcohol, and this was his first time ever inside a church for a church service. It was through a support group that Mike had found himself drawn to faith in Christ. So, for the first time, there he was, with his wife, in church. He was looking forward to the opportunity to make a public profession of his faith and, he realized, this was the time, when he heard the pastor call for “Servants”, that’s when he knew he was a servant of Christ. He jumped up out of his pew and went forward down the center aisle. As he was to tell the pastor after the service, he had no idea what he was doing and he needed all the help and instruction the pastor could give him.

Help and instruction. That’s what Jesus’ audience needed, and although Jesus was instructing them, they just couldn’t grasp what he was telling them. His flesh was bread? Those who were seeking salvation were to eat his flesh? That was a bit much, and they blurted out the obvious question, “How can this man give us His flesh to eat?” But ignoring their question, Jesus goes on to say they are also to drink His blood. What on earth was he telling them?

We should not read this morning’s gospel thinking the people who were listening to Him were antagonistic to Jesus – far from it. They’re actually listening to every word He has to say, but they’re in genuine shock. We ought to be, too. It’s bizarre, isn’t it, to be asked to eat flesh and drink blood? We have a word for that – it’s called cannibalism. It is bizarre, when you come to think of it, eating Christ’s body, drinking His blood. Modern teens would say eeeww!

The crowd’s question might well be ours. After all, in a few minutes I’m going to invite you to come forward to receive the body and blood of Christ in the form of wafer and wine. Just what does it mean, for wafers to be called Christ’s flesh, His body, and for wine to be called Christ’s blood? When brought face to face with this teaching of Jesus, when we stop to think about it seriously, we may find ourselves having to do some

fairly careful rethinking in terms of what we understand is taking place when we come forward and take this meal.

The reading from the gospel we heard this morning is the climax to the sixth chapter, which began by telling us that the Passover was near but it hadn't yet arrived. In fact, in this gospel (if you read it) you might be surprised to find out that Jesus never gets to eat the Passover meal. Instead – are you ready? – in the section we listened to this morning, Jesus presents Himself as the Passover meal, that great celebration of God rescuing His people from slavery and bondage in Egypt. And here, in the gospel, Jesus presents Himself, His body and His blood as the Passover meal, invested with new meaning for those who gather to eat it. Where we're set free from slavery and bondage to sin in this world, and offered freely the promise of eternal life. The celebration of salvation in and through Jesus Christ . . . and all of this stemming from this wonderful and astounding promise we heard in the 54th verse: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day." Notice all the verbs here: eat, drink, receive; not believe. Such a radical statement leaves us reeling, surely there's more to gaining salvation than just eating bread and drinking wine!

Mike was reeling, too, when he came forward from the congregation. Both he and the pastor got a surprise. What the pastor saw approaching him down the center aisle was a large, tough looking, muscular man with tattooed arms, coming towards him. The Pastor had never seen him before. All he could think was that some of his enthusiastic members had conscripted this guy to help serve communion that morning. What Mike saw when he arrived at the altar was a kindly pastor who instead of asking him to say anything, handed him a tray of little pre-filled wine glasses and in the other hand a silver plate of tiny bread cubes. Mike had no idea what to do with them, but being quick on the uptake, he followed everybody else who was up there being a server. But it didn't work. He had to turn around and come back and whisper to the pastor, what on earth was he supposed to do? What else could the minister do, but launch into a whispered explanation of the communion tradition of their church. How else can we explain communion?

We as Christians in general and Lutherans in particular, have a name for this amazing meal of bread and wine – we call it Holy Communion, others call it the Eucharist and still others call it the Lord's Supper, but we're all talking about the same thing. Things, however, get a lot more tricky when we try to explain exactly how the bread turns into Christ's flesh or how Christ turns into the bread, and ditto with the wine. If I've got it right (and I don't mean any offense), our Roman Catholic friends believe that during the mass when the priest consecrates the bread and the wine they actually become the body and blood of Christ and I think that's when they ring a bell to make sure that everybody is paying attention to what is happening at that moment in the mass. That's why they treat the wafers with such care and respect, trying not to lose any crumbs and putting the uneaten wafers away for safe keeping after the service. And why the priests

drink the last of the wine and carefully wash the chalice so none is actually left behind. We, on the other hand, as Lutherans, teach that Christ is present "in, with, and under" the bread and the wine and that when the service is over the bread and wine revert to their natural state. Some congregations that serve communion from loaves of bread leave the unconsumed loaves out, along with the unconsumed wine, at the coffee hour and invite members of the congregation to finish them. Other Christians hold that the bread is always bread and the wine always wine, but those who participate in the meal are spiritually united with Christ when they partake.

Gallons of ink have been spilt on this exercise, thousands of hearts broken, and many a small soul crushed over determinations made on the basis of these human explanations used to divide the body of Christ, rather than unite it.

Union is the important thing. An intimate relationship is what happens in communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, the mass. When we consume that meal, we're brought into a tangible and intimate relationship with Christ in which we receive the forgiveness which He earned for us, and the promise of life after death which He won for us.

It's to such an intimate relationship that Jesus is referring when He talks of His abiding in us and our abiding in Him. It is in and through this intimate relationship that we hear his teaching and learn of His ways. And so we begin to use such knowledge and understanding to navigate our own way in life, through the world as His disciples. It is an ongoing and life-long process. But the securing of that process is in the communion meal, where we are actually relieved of the need to figure out exactly how the meal works, exactly how Jesus becomes bread and wine. Rather what is called for is trust, pure and simple trust, and faith that it is what Jesus says it is.

The poor pastor did his level best in the limited time he had, to whisper to Mike what it was all about. But Mike was still confused. "Which of these do I eat first?" he whispered. The pastor explained the Christian community had always taken the bread first and then followed with the wine.

"Should I do that now?" Mike asked, his nervous hands making all those little glasses clink as he held them. "Why not?" the pastor chuckled. He took the trays from Mike, put them on the altar, and gingerly, almost cautiously, Mike took first a piece of bread, and then the cup. "You have just taken Jesus into your body," said the pastor smiling, trying to encourage him. Mike's eyes filled with tears, he blushed very red, and embarrassed and confused, he fled back down the aisle to his place.

After the service was over the pastor was standing at the door, and he couldn't help but notice Mike coming toward him. Before he could move, the muscular man had

gathered the pastor in his arms, buried his head on the pastor's shoulder, and began to weep. The pastor stood there and held him as he cried.

A few moments later a woman came and stood with them. "I'm Mike's wife," she said, as her own eyes filled with tears. "He's so embarrassed. He's never been to church before in his life. He's been on drugs and alcohol for years. This week, though, at the support group, he felt drawn to Christ and he asked if he could come to the service and he thought there might be a chance for him to stand up and profess his new found faith. So, when you asked for 'servers' to come forward, he thought you said 'servants', and that meant him. Then you handed him the communion trays, and he was confused and embarrassed. He had no idea what to do with them."

The pastor stepped back and looked the man in the face. His once-hardened facial features seemed to be softened by his tears. "God loves you," the pastor said, smiling. This morning you received one of the most precious things the church has to offer, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the body and blood of His Son. And in that tiny meal you were forgiven all the sins of your past and given the promise of eternal life. Christ now is in you and you, my friend, are in Christ, called to live from His word, to live as a child of God and as a brother of Christ."

"But I didn't know what I was doing," said Mike. "None of us knows what we're doing," said the pastor. "We just abide, and Christ abides with us. He blessed you today to go out into the world and be a blessing to others."

Come to think of it, that what Christ is asking of us this day.

Amen.