



Pastor Mark Knappe's Sermon

SERMON – 11TH PENTECOST

JOHN 6:35-51

AUGUST 8, 2021

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit+ Taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are they who trust in him. Jesus said, I am the bread of life.

When Pastor Nelson invited me to participate in this three-week sermon series on the Holy Eucharist I was quite delighted to spend some time contemplating this supreme gift of heaven and earth - the very Heart and Center - of Holy Mother Church. The burden upon the preacher to speak of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Sacrament is not a heavy one, but light and easy. The Holy Spirit does all the heavy lifting through the gift of faith. From the moment we hopped in our chariots today, which carried us here to the House of the Lord, there was one destination in mind, one goal. The Holy Spirit calling gathering, and enlightening the baptized by placing us in the historic liturgy of the church. With the destination being the Altar - there Jesus says, when you put out the bread and wine I will show up - you can count on it. (Nestigen) The sermon today will attempt to cover 3 areas:

1. From the beginning the Church was very clear about the Real Presence of the Lord in the Holy Eucharist.
2. Luther and the Lutheran confessional writings maintained this truth. Not introducing anything new.
3. And then the Great Lutheran questions what does this mean?

Christ was the Word, that spake it, He took the bread, and brake it; And what His Word doth make it, That I believe, and take it. From the English poet/priest John Donne. This brings us to the very beginning of the Lord's Supper. *Christ was the Word, that spake it, and what His Word doth make it.*

In the 6th chapter of John, Jesus the very Word made flesh is causing quite a stir. This is one of the more dynamic chapters in the Gospels, if not the entire New Testament. The first part of that chapter, the crowds are huge. Jesus feeds the multitudes, he walks on water. Explosive forms of evangelism tend to bring in the crowds.

But half-way into the chapter the scene shifts dramatically. Our Lord is now in the synagogue in Capernaum and it is class time. Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life. And that is just the introduction, for our Lord continues to take us deeper into the mystery of life with him when he says; I am the living bread sent down from heaven, if any eats of this bread he will live for ever, and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.

And now the classroom begins to grumble, even the Lord's inner circle of disciples, begins to grumble, "this is a hard teaching, who can comprehend it? And those crowds that were there at the beginning of the chapter? Gone. Jesus turns around, and asks the disciples, Do you, too, wish to go away?

Here Peter makes a dramatic confession of faith - Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life. For we have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God. Keeping in mind, no one left Jesus when he said he was the vine or the good shepherd, or the light of the world, for those were metaphors, images, they were no intellectual challenge. But the disciples resistance to the bread of life sayings tells us that this was more than just a metaphor.

So in John's gospel it seems that this confession of faith is wrapped up in the fact that the Eucharist is the very Body and Blood of the Lord. St Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth is already in the 1c speaking of the Eucharist as being handed down to him from the apostles. For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. The early church Fathers like Cyril of Jerusalem would point to this text and say: Since Christ himself affirmed and said "This is my blood,

who shall ever hesitate saying that this is not his Blood!

Luther will take a similar line at a meeting in Marburg Germany. More about that in a few moments.

But back to the church Fathers. Ignatius of Antioch around the year 107 while on the way to his own execution spoke of the Eucharist as the “medicine of Immortality.” Now if it were just a symbol surely Ignatius would not have attributed such divine power to the very essence of the Eucharist. Origen of Alexandria : *You who are accustomed to take part in divine mysteries know, when you receive the body of the Lord, how you protect it with all caution and veneration lest any small part fall from it, lest anything of the consecrated gift be lost.*”

If Origen and the community understood the Eucharist to be a mere symbol, why would they handle it with such reverence? Which calls to mind an episode from the Blessed Luther. During the Mass one day, Luther dropped the chalice, spilling the consecrated wine all over the chancel floor. What happened next was, not a dry eye in the congregation was found as they beheld their beloved priest down on his hands and knees licking up the spilled wine.

Jumping ahead to the 13thc. let us hear a few words regarding one of the great thinkers of the church, Thomas Aquinas. For Thomas the Eucharist was far more than an intellectual exercise. For him it was the very center of his spiritual life. Thomas would serve at the Mass everyday, and it was reported that he seldom got through the Mass without tears. So intense was his sense of Christ’s presence on the Altar.

And while Thomas like Luther later, would write volumes on the Eucharist I would like to share with you just one. Thomas wrote: *Whereas the other sacraments contain only the power of Christ, the Eucharist uniquely contains Christ himself, in the full reality of his presence. And thus it is the chief of the sacramental signs.*

And now to Luther and the church of the 16th century. The Augsburg Confession (1530) is the birth certificate of what became the Lutheran church. It is in all actuality a catholic document. Luther’s colleague the boy wonder, Melancthon was the author. From beginning to end the AC states, we are not introducing anything new.

Article 24 in fact states, we do not abolish the Mass in fact we hold it with greater reverence than our opponents. I kind of enjoy that little bit of theological swagger. Article X of the AC is titled the Lord’s Supper.

Because there was no disagreement on this matter it is very brief, it simply states: Our churches teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat the Lord’s Supper (I Corinthians 10:16) They reject those who teach otherwise.

A year before the AC there was a great meeting or Colloquy in Marburg-1529. It was an attempt by the reformers to come together presenting a unified front. And so there in Marburg in the castle of Phillip of Hesse there ensued a great theological debate between Luther and the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli. They agreed on 13 points, completely, but not the 14th, the Sacrament of the Altar. While Luther honored the plain sense of Scripture---This is my body---Zwingli could not bring himself on that day to make that confession. On that day he argued that the bread and wine on the altar was merely a memorial symbol. Truth be told, a deeper reading of Zwingli we find he does acknowledge the Presence of Christ in the bread and wine. Unfortunately for the whole church he could bring himself to it on that day.

So Luther never shy about dramatics, at a key moment in the debate - pulls off a cloth napkin from the table whereby he had earlier inscribed the words *This is my body!* (*Hoc est corpus meum*) Pointing to the table etching he said these are the words of my Lord, who am I to differ! Here again Luther is not introducing anything new. Sticking to the plain sense of Scripture, the apostolic witness and the church Fathers, Luther holds fast to the confession of faith that Jesus is truly present, in with and under the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Therefore in the SC Luther begins with the question.

What is the Sacrament of the Altar? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine for us Christians to eat and drink, instituted by Christ Himself. Luther would go on to say that

the most important word in the Catechism is the word IS. As in this IS my body, this IS my blood.

So what does this mean? The Scriptures tell us over and over again that the Divine Word brings into effect what it proclaims ... Let there be light, and there was. Jesus is the Divine Word. He stands up in the boat on the Sea of Galilee and says: Peace be still, and the wind ceased and there was a dead calm. The Lord shouts down into the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus—Come out and so he does. He kneels at the bed of a young dead girl and says *Talitha cum, (that is little girl, rise up)* and immediately she got up and walked. He says this is my body, this is my blood for you! And so it is. It is always the Word that when spoken over the bread and wine, delivers exactly what it says.

So what does it mean, that here at the Altar in bread and wine -Jesus the Lord of heaven and earth gathers his friends day after day, week after week?

My first year in seminary I was assigned along with a classmate to a teaching parish on the West Side of Chicago. My classmate at that time was feeling like Elijah in our OT reading. The Jezebel's of life were coming at him on different fronts. Some years earlier, a Pastor of this particular parish whom we never knew, had the wisdom to reclaim the true Lutheran practice of weekly Eucharist. My classmate living in the cave of anxieties, doubts and fears said to me one day - if nothing good happens all week, I know I can make it to Sunday, and Jesus will meet me in His Holy Supper.

Week after week Jesus says to all the baptized - Arise and eat for the journey is too great for you to go it alone. And so Jesus gives us that food, food for the journey, food that is nothing less than himself - in so doing keeping another promise - And Lo I am with you always. And what's more, when you are returning from the Altar, the devil is cowering in fear and trembling, for he sees Jesus in you!(St John Chrysostom)

And the news gets even better. Not only is the Eucharist food for the journey in the present, but it is Holy food that carries us to our true home. A mentor of mine, now of blessed memory told me this story: There was a faithful pillar of the parish who was gone for a week. Upon returning he asked, "Pastor Jim, how many people were in church last week?" Pastor Jim, without blinking an eye said, 144,000! We celebrated the Eucharist.

Yes, whenever we the church puts out the bread of wine, it becomes a very crowded place. As Pastor Nelson rightly noted a few weeks ago, we the baptized have dual citizenship. We belong to two churches simultaneously, the church on earth and the church in heaven.

The Sacrament of the Altar is the place where Christians can go to meet their loved ones. For at the Altar Jesus who is both the maitre de and the meal, does not come alone. He brings with him the entire company of heaven. He brings with him, Mary Magdalene and Peter, Angels, and arkangels, cherubim and seraphim, Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary, grandma and grandpa, we are rubbing elbows with those who have gone before us. Yes the church gets pretty crowded when it puts out the bread and wine for Jesus.

St Augustine once said, this is one meal that will make your hungrier. Hungrier for the intense love given and shed from the Triune God, hungrier for his living presence in your life, Hungrier to be his disciples of love and mercy, hungrier, hungrier for His eternal life. Hungrier to become what you eat! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, come now to this Holy Altar, come now, Taste and See the goodness of your Lord. Happy are they who trust in him.