

Eat!
John 6:41-51
Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri
August 12, 2018 – Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost



Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. According to a fairly recent report on American dietary habits, I learned eggs and fat are no longer considered bad for you, and that it isn't as unhealthy as we once thought for middle-aged men to carry around a few extra pounds. Since I fall into that category, I welcomed this as good news. That report, however, doesn't change the fact that a great many people in our day are so obsessed with weight that they bounce from one diet to another trying look like one of those slim, fit, attractive people you we see in the ads for home gyms – which promise that is how you could look by simply committing yourself to a 20 minute workout every three days!

Consider the Olympics – which are coming up again in February of 2020 in Tokyo, Japan. Imagine for a moment what it takes out of an Olympic gymnast when their trainer encourages them to control their weight by limiting how much they eat – when the fact is that our bodies need proper nutrition to stay healthy. Although such a regimen might, in fact, produce one of those petite, elfin athletes we often see competing in the Olympics, what cost will that athlete have to pay for victory? It's a proven fact that a person's maturity is often stunted by bad eating habits, which means that those who travel this path hoping to become great, may, in the end, find that they've also become incredibly unhealthy.

I suppose in a sport like gymnastics where for the most part you're "washed up" by the ripe old age of 18, there might be *some* method to such madness – but not for us as Christians. The Christian walk and life – unlike the discipline of competitive athletics – is a challenge that lasts a life-time. Like the 40 year journey Israel endured while fleeing the tyranny of Pharaoh, our marathon began at Baptism, where God sealed us with His Holy Spirit for the day of redemption – for the day of our Lord's return. And if you look carefully, you can see how the course has been laid out for your life. It began when you emerged from the womb of new birth in Holy Baptism, and it will end at the grave from which we and all believers will rise when our Lord comes again on Judgment day. In between we must run the race – and for that we have to eat, and eat well!

It's a rigorous course God has laid out. St. Paul describes it in detail when he writes that we should rid ourselves of all bitterness, rage and anger – cease our brawling and slander – no longer engage in blasphemous talk against God or His people – put aside *every*

form of malice, worry and anxiety – be kind, compassionate, tender-hearted and merciful to one another – tolerate those things we consider sub-standard in others – forgive one another in the same way Jesus did when He prayed forgiveness for His enemies – give generously to others – free our hearts of all resentment, animosity, and loathing – and, as imitators of God, walk in love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a sweet smelling sacrifice to God.

That's how rigorous your life as a Christian ought to be. From the moment you are sealed with God's Holy Spirit in Baptism, until that day you breathe your last, your life is to be free from all those things which aren't part of Christ. Conversely, you are also to be Christ-like in all your dealings with others. You're to do *everything* in your power to make sure you don't take on the "odor" of this world in how it handles problems or people. And you're supposed to "smell" as sweetly as our Savior, who offered Himself up unto death in sacrifice for those He came to save. You are to become the loving men and women of God in whom our Savior can be seen in everything you do or say. And for that you need to eat the proper Food. You need to eat heartily, lest the sport spoil you and wear you down to nothing.

In this morning's Old Testament lesson we read how Elijah – suffering from hunger and exhaustion – finally sat down beneath the branches of a broom tree and prayed for death. He said to the Lord: "I've had enough! Take my life and let me leave this world!" Then he laid down and fell asleep. That was when the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said: "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." Well, the journey is too much for us, as well. Our injuries don't want to heal. In fact, like Elijah, sometimes we don't want them to heal. We'd rather nurse them, hold on to them, and draw strength from our suffering. We're no better than our ancestors. We're no stronger than Elijah. Sometimes we've had enough – and it *would be* easier for us to die.

So to us, the Lord also says: "Eat!" And then, *He* provides the Meal! But it might be more than some are ready for. Like an over-enthusiastic athlete trying to gain control of our weight, we've become so accustomed to a regimen of starvation that we don't have the stomach for the Feast God has set before us. That's what the Jews in today's Gospel were like. Spiritually, they were like athletes in training – denying their bodies certain food and drink in the false hope that they could

somehow be purified by what they did – or didn't – allow themselves to eat and drink. They were used to – or so they thought – strictly abiding by and obeying the Law of God. They erroneously believed making one's self right with God was nothing more than a matter of "living right" – and attending to even the tiniest, most obscure of God's so-called laws as found in the writings of their rabbis. But in spite of all their outward rigor, and despite all their supposed spiritual training, these people were woefully unhealthy when it came to their standing before God. Like overworked little athletes who may never blossom or mature the way God intends them to, these Jews were stunting their spiritual growth. When Jesus confronted them with the Bread of Life, they didn't have the stomach or appetite for it. They turned up their noses at the Feast God had provided, and soon they were grumbling about Jesus because He said: "I AM the Bread which came down from heaven."

How tragic when people cannot stomach what Christ has come to freely give! How distressing it is to consider the consequences of what happens when, due to the hardness of their hearts, people aren't willing to rise and eat what Jesus lavishly offers! That's the kind of distress and despair I've heard in the voices of some who've too late come to realize that the training they've endured for the sport they so dearly loved was quite possibly doing their bodies irreparable harm. Yet at the same time these same athletes often have difficulty shaking off all those years of training which taught them eating was bad – starving was good – smaller is better – and that being bigger always spells failure. How many Christians struggle with that same kind of self-deceit when they think that what Jesus has set before them isn't good enough – that what Jesus tells them couldn't possibly be the final word – and that they must listen also – or instead – to their own reason and senses – while believing they have to hold on to what they've been taught before. But what they've been taught is what the world is always trying to teach, namely that you are only as good as your accomplishments, and that finally, you only get what you really deserve! Sadly, those who hold on to the ways of the world seldom grow into mature Christians, or blossom into the joyful people God created them to be. And that's not because they aren't working or trying hard enough. It's because they aren't feasting on the Bread of Life.

A so-called Christianity which seeks to feed itself and provide for its own growth may well produce an athlete of sorts, but it will *never* produce a healthy one! And make no mistake about it, God wants you to be spiritually healthy. He wants you to be full of peace, joy and life – by filling you with Himself. That's why He

sent His Son into our world, and that's why He continues to draw you to Himself through Christ. He doesn't challenge you to scale the heights of heaven – He put a stop to that at Babel! Instead, He comes to Earth so that you might freely have Him for yourself – not by trying harder, by denying yourself, opening your heart, or even by making a decision to come to Him – for as the Scriptures teach, no one comes to Christ unless drawn to Him by the Father – but simply by following in the way the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies us all through His Means of Grace.

Jesus says: "Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from Him comes to Me." That's the mark of a healthy Christian – the one who eats and drinks the Bread of Life – the one who feasts by faith on Jesus Christ – the one who doesn't seek security or peace apart from Him who stands among us in Word, water, bread and wine. Therefore if your desire is to be a healthy Christian – and may I say that's what God wants each of us to be – you must seek nothing apart from the Savior – and only in those Means wherewith He feeds you of Himself. Outside of Christ, it's impossible to find a loving Father, and Christ cannot be found apart from His Word. But in His Word – and in the Sacraments of His Church – we not only have the Son – and with Him the Father – but we also have the Holy Spirit!

What joy it is then, to consider all God has given us within this Word of Christ. We have the fullness of the Triune God – the unchangeable promise that we've been forgiven – and, of course, the very body and the blood Jesus gave and shed for the salvation of the world! We have Christ's life, death, and resurrection. We have Sonship with the Father, and the seal of His Spirit. We have God in all His glory – and He has us in all our weakness, pain and sorrow. That's why he doesn't want us to deny ourselves even a single morsel of this Bread from heaven. The journey *is* far too long for you to travel it alone, but the Food God gives is perfectly sufficient for the way. Dear friends, there's no need for you to go a single day without God's Word to strengthen you – no purpose in neglecting the comfort of His Holy Absolution – and no reason to go without the nourishment His body and His blood alone provide. God therefore has placed all these things in our midst to keep you healthy and to put flesh and muscle on your bones – and all so that you might blossom into full maturity, enjoy the life God's given you to live – and then receive the life eternal His Son came to earn for us all on the cross. Eat it! Eat it and live! Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.