

# Eating And Drinking Unto Eternal Life

John 6:51–58

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

August 19, 2018 – Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In this morning's Gospel you were listening along with me when we heard our Lord Christ make a most amazing proclamation. "I AM the Living Bread which came down from heaven." He declared in no uncertain words. "If anyone eats of *this* Bread, he will live forever; and the Bread that I shall give is My Flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." These words of Jesus are very familiar to just about anyone who has even the slightest knowledge of Holy Scripture. But these words are also, perhaps, some of the most difficult to understand of any Jesus ever spoke.

These words of Jesus here in His "Bread of Life" sermon push us much further and deeper – not to mention challenging our comprehension more completely – than anything else He's said up to this point. Up until now, Jesus had been speaking quite "safely." He had been tantalizing and teasing us as He drew and led us to that place He wants us to be. But until *these* particular words came out of His mouth, there was still some semblance of sanity to His conversation. Prior to this sermon, Jesus was only speaking about the necessity of having faith in Him – that is, about "eating" of Him by believing and trusting His words. He was teaching that whoever believes in Him has eternal life – and that with all true believers on the Last Day He will raise such a person up into heaven to live with Him forever.

Of course, there were still some who were upset even when He spoke these words. There were a goodly number who grumbled over His claim to be the only Savior of sinners – people who talked among themselves saying: "How can *He* call Himself the 'Bread come down from heaven?' Isn't He the Son of Joseph and Mary?" But Jesus never backed down. He felt no need to modify His speech so that people wouldn't be offended by it. He refused to bend His words to meet people "where they were." Instead He pushed and pressed them even further so that they might come to where *He* was. *This* Bread of Life, you see, *this* Living Bread come down from heaven which a person may eat of and live forever – is no ordinary loaf of bread. It isn't even remotely like the manna in the wilderness which fed the children of Israel during their 40 years of wandering – nor is it similar in any way to the barley loaves Christ once multiplied and distributed to well over five thousand hungry people on a hillside. *This* Living Bread is Jesus' own flesh and blood – His humanity – conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and nailed to a cross on Mt. Calvary for the life of the world.

At *these* words, the grumbling over what Jesus had said before now turned into a full-blown argument. People were shocked, and they shouted out: "Has He lost His mind? What on earth is He talking about?" Surely, they all thought, Jesus was speaking "spiritually," "figuratively," or "parabolically." After all, how could He give up His flesh for His followers to eat? But Jesus never answered their questions – for, in fact, there is no answer to the question of how this can be – no matter how many times people might ask it. Indeed, if you try to answer the question: "How can Jesus give His followers His flesh to eat?" you'll come up with the wrong answer *every single time* – for the fact of the matter is that He alone is the Lord. He can do *whatever* He wants – and He can do it *however* He pleases.

So, instead of explaining how this might be, Jesus simply turned up the volume a bit more. "Amen, amen," He says (or, as some translations say, "Most assuredly" – meaning we best perk our ears up and listen, because He's about to say something He doesn't want us to miss). "I'm telling you the truth. Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you." Jesus had begun this "Bread of Life" sermon with faith in the heart – saying that whoever believes in Him as Savior has eternal life. Next He moved on to eating and the mouth when He said: "whoever eats and drinks has eternal life." What started out with Him speaking of the necessity of His followers taking Him into themselves by faith, winded up with Him saying that they must also *actually* eat His flesh and drink His blood! And just in case you might still be inclined to spiritualize or ignore His words, Jesus changes the little word "*eat*" to "*chew*" – something you can do only with your mouth. He says (and I'm translating literally), "Whoever *chews* My flesh and *drinks* My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the Last Day."

Talk like that could get you committed – if not crucified! Yet, these *are* the very words Jesus chose to bring us to the ultimate crisis of faith. Will we trust Him after hearing Him speak such words? Will we trust Someone who's willing to – and seems intent on pushing things *this far*? Will we trust this Jesus who tells His disciples to do the unthinkable – something forbidden even in the Old Testament – to *actually* drink His blood and eat His flesh – and to believe that by such eating and drinking they'll gain eternal life? Unbelief, of course, says, "No, this cannot be. No one can do such a thing as this." But *faith says* – contrary to human reason – contrary to everything we know to be true and just and right in this world and the way it operates – *faith says*: "Is this not is the same Lord who hung on a cross for me? Would He lie to me now?"

It should come as no surprise that many who previously followed Jesus soon gave up their allegiance to Him after hearing this sermon. Scripture says they turned away and no longer followed Him at all. Why? Because *these* words were too hard for them to hear – too demanding, and too difficult. It's recorded that even His closest disciples were disturbed and shaken by what He said. Yet how many people today – upon hearing the Biblical teaching concerning the Lord's Supper – still turn away from it and believe what they want to believe? Christ's words, you see, are offensive to our reason. They're hard on our ears. We still wonder, "How can He endlessly give us His flesh to eat and His blood to drink?"

But that's not really what we're asking, is it? After all, we know *how* Jesus did what He did on the night of the Passover when He was betrayed, arrested, and led away to be put to death on the cross. On that night He gave thanks, broke bread, and spoke those amazing words that are still used today in the celebration of the Eucharist: "Take, eat, this is My body, given for you." On that same night He also took the cup of wine after everyone had eaten, offered up thanks, then gave it to His disciples, saying: "Take, drink, this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed *for you*, for the forgiveness of your sins."

According to Christ's very own last will and testament, then, His flesh *is* true food, and His blood *is* true drink. The very same flesh and blood which was given and shed in sacrifice on Calvary's cross, is the very same flesh and blood He now gives to His Church – to us – as a feast of everlasting life. Even today, whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus – trusting explicitly in His gracious Word and Promise – receives what our Lord deigns to give us all – namely the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and deliverance from sin, death, and the power of the devil. The mouth receives the food and the drink, but faith draws on its benefits.

Perhaps you might recall how, in the book of Leviticus, sacrifices were continually being offered to God for the sins of the people – including peace, or communion sacrifices. When these sacrifices were offered up, flesh and blood would be separated. The blood would be poured out onto the altar, while the flesh of the sacrifice would be burned as an offering to the Lord – and a portion reserved as a meal to be eaten by the priests in the presence of God. This meal was communion with God and communion with one another. Today, the Lord's Supper stands as a fulfillment of those Old Testament Communion Sacrifices – only now the sacrifice has already been accomplished once and for all by Jesus' death on the cross. It was there His body was offered up to God in our place – where His life was given over unto death for our life. He's become our Substitute, or Sacrifice – the vicarious Victim for our sin. There on that cross His blood was shed to make atonement – to pay the price for our rebellion – and to make peace between God and man. Now that all that's been accomplished, Christ gives us to eat of the fruit of this sacrifice – His very flesh and blood – so that we might

take into our bodies all the blessings and benefits He earned for us by His suffering and death.

"Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day," says Jesus. That's why the Early Church often spoke lovingly of the Lord's Supper as the "medicine of immortality." They rightly saw Christ's body and blood as the antidote to sin and death – as a food that unleashed the energies of Jesus' atoning work against the sin and death that weighs us down. Dr. Luther wrote about this in his *Large Catechism* when he said:

*"We must never regard the Sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body has benefited also. Why then do we act as if the Sacrament were a poison which would kill us if we ate of it? Or course, it is true that those who despise the Sacrament and lead unchristian lives receive it to their harm and damnation. To such people nothing can be good or wholesome, just as when a sick person willfully eats and drinks what is forbidden him by the physician. But those who feel their weakness, who are anxious to be rid of it and desire help, should regard and use the Sacrament as a precious antidote against the poison in their systems. For here in the Sacrament you receive from Christ's lips the forgiveness of sins, which contains and conveys God's grace and Spirit with all His gifts, protection, defense, and power against death and the devil and all evils." (LC V.68–70)*

Why do you come to the Lord's Supper? Do you come more out of duty and obligation than desire? Do you come more because you "have to" than because you "get to?" How often have you decided ahead of time that you wouldn't "get anything out of it" – or that you weren't going to enjoy it – especially considering all the time it takes away from your otherwise busy Sabbath day's rest? But friends, your hunger is greater than you might think – and your thirst is deeper than you can ever imagine. Death still looms large, the devil is real and restless, and your old sinful flesh isn't going to give you a moment's rest. Our Lord Jesus wants to set before you a meal such as you could never have dreamed of – a feast the likes of which this world has never known – and you've been invited to this banquet whenever it's set before us. And of this Banquet our Lord says: "Come, eat My flesh and drink My blood. Leave your simple ways and you will live. Live no longer in the darkness of your own imagination, but walk instead in the way of understanding. The feast is ready. Come now and eat." In the name of Jesus, 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.