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John 6:56-69

Rev. Peter Wall

Assistant to the Bishop, Worship

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Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This 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 for ever.’ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, ‘Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, ‘For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.’

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’

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In the sixth chapter of St John’s Gospel, in which we have been immersed these last weeks, Jesus is speaking extensively about who He is and what he wants his followers to do. He uses the image and metaphor of ‘the bread of life’ and (as only John’s Gospel can do) expands the metaphor and deepens the teaching. He responds to the disciples’ comment (or perhaps complaint) that this teaching is difficult and that nobody could accept it by reminding them about the things he has repeatedly said and taught about eternal life and their responsibilities. The images about being ‘food’, about ‘feeding’ (notably in the story of

the feeding of the thousands upon the hillside) challenge Jesus' followers and us. To the point that, at the end of today's reading, some went away and could no longer stay. And Peter confessed that there was no one else to whom to go— that he and the closest followers of Jesus 'have come to know and believe' that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

Like many of those first followers, I think that you and I find some of these teachings difficult, to say the least. Our world in 2024, in these perilous times, is a difficult and disturbing place, and we often find ourselves not knowing what to think, how to react, how to love.

I am writing this from the beautiful province of Saskatchewan, where I have just participated in the 2024 National Worship Conference, a joint ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Anglican Church, which took place at Luther College in Regina. It was a transformative and deeply moving conference, whose title: 'Stones Cry Out: Praying with the Land' challenged us all to look at our colonial past and present, our need to remake ourselves and our churches, and at Creator and creation's high and difficult expectations acting upon each one of us, tending to the land (place, home, soil...) and the living stones which we become in order to build a realm of inclusion, grace, and peace. It was a deeply important time for all who attended and, we hope, planted seeds of new growth in dazzling ways in each of us.

Let's face it—the teachings of Jesus—this particular teaching in today's Gospel lesson—to be the heralds and bringers of 'the bread of life' and to carry the words of eternal life to the world in which we live—is challenging indeed. The stones do cry out; God's children suffer in so many ways and in so many places; the history which we share in our country is marked by exclusion, pain, and isolation. The world which we see reflected on our screens and in our news is, at so many levels, an inhuman (and unholy!) display of enmity, violence, and war. Children go unfed; refugees suffer; our indigenous people continue to suffer huge indignities and pain; unkindness and a lack of civility and understanding seem always to hold sway. Into this world, you and I are called to bring light and peace; to be the bearers of the Bread of Life; to be followers and advocates for the One who calls us into new ways of being.

As we gather today—whether here at the Lord's table, at our cottages and camps, in our tents and trailers, in our backyards and our beaches, on the beauty of a late August Sunday, we are reminded that, by being a community of love, a place of inspiration and serenity, a place where word and sacrament, prayer and praise, bread and wine renew and revive us, we are nourished for the days ahead, and given a glimpse of the new reality that we can build. It takes determination, the confidence of the gift of faith, and the deep joy that comes from knowing that we are deeply loved that empowers and enables us to be the bearers of that good Word and the nourishment for the world that the Bread of Life brings. It is not easy—it will require much from us—it always has. Significant challenges, if seen as eye opening opportunities, always compel us to rise to the occasion. Gathering together—praying together—singing together—being strengthened together is always a joy and a source of inspiration and hope for us all.

As St. Peter says: to whom else, Lord, could we possibly go? We indeed have come to believe and know!

Will you pray with me—

*Holy and ever gracious One, you come and stand among us this day. Strengthen and comfort us in our communion with you and with each other. Show us your face in the faces of those around us; give us abundant grace and joy in the work you have given us to do; help us to spread serenity and to those we will meet this week. Nourish us in this sacrament that we, being nourished and fed by Your presence among us, may be bread for the hungry and food for the journey. Give us thankful and joy-filled hearts, in the name of the one whom we follow, your Son, our Saviour and our Friend. **Amen.***