

Series B, Proper 15, Pentecost 11

*[Jesus said,] “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” **After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”** John 6:51-69*

In the name of the Father and of the (+)Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The confession of the Church is not an opinion poll, for the Church only confesses those things which her holy Bridegroom has given to her. She does not vote on what she will or will not accept. She does not choose for herself what is or is not from Christ. She simply believes and repeats what she receives from God.

That which God gives to her and which forms the foundation of her faith is nothing other than His very Word. This is the same Word that was spoken at creation; and creation did not consider whether or not it wanted to obey. The world simply came to be, and it was good. This is the same Word spoken on Mount Sinai; and Moses did not consider what he wanted to write down and what he wanted to omit. The written Law simply came to be, and it was good. This is the same Word written in the covenant, the same Word spoken to and by the prophets, and the

same Word recorded in the canon of Holy Scripture. No man chose it to be this way. The Word of God simply is. It exists by and through and with the power of God; and even when it is hard to accept and obey it is very good. So what the Church speaks in her confession is truth and not opinion. Man has no authority to affect its validity. Even more so than Mr. Ripley himself, man may simply believe it or not.

This is what Jesus encountered throughout John 6. He spoke many hard sayings in this chapter, and subsequently He faced much opposition. He tested Philipp and the Twelve by commanding them to feed the 5,000 men. They asked Him how so little food or money could feed so many people. He told the people following Him to labor not for the food that perishes but for the food enduring unto eternal life. They asked Him what works they should do. He told them to believe in the One having been sent from God. They demanded a sign. He spoke of the true bread from heaven, greater even than manna. They asked for some as though it would provide their daily sustenance. He called Himself this true bread from heaven. They complained and called Him Joseph's son. He told them that they must eat of His flesh and drink of His blood to have life. They fought among themselves and wondered how this could be. He laid bare the truth before them that no one can come to Him apart from the Father. They simply walked away. No one could refute His words. Indeed, their fathers' bones were wasted away in the wilderness. And so they chose not to believe.

This was, in fact, the only choice they could make. They could not choose to believe Jesus. They could not choose to accept Him any more than they could choose to accept the effects of gravity. Receiving Christ can only be granted by the Father, and He grants that freely to all men. Man can only reject what God gives, and this is what they do. They complained and muttered and stumbled and fought against Jesus, and then they just stopped following Him.

The Church, however, endured. Christ turned to the Twelve and quite pointedly asked them, “Will you leave as well? Do you not wish to depart?” And Simon the Rock confessed back to Jesus the same words that He had just spoken. “Lord, to what man would we depart? You have the words of life, just like you told us! We believe--more than that, we know that You are the holy one of God!” There was no debate or discussion or casting of ballots among the apostles. The Word of God had spoken; and it was very good.

Indeed, what Peter confessed was what Christ had given to Him. The flesh and bone of sinful man did not reveal it to him, but the Father in heaven revealed it. And Peter’s confession is now also what the Church continues to confess to this day. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the Son of the Most High. No one voted on this. It is the truth handed down from before creation.

There are still those today, however, who choose not to believe. When the sayings and teachings of Christ get to be too hard they turn their backs on Him. It’s much easier to eat a Big Mac than it is to share a meal with the homeless. It’s much easier to hoard and save money than it is to support the work of the Church. It’s much easier to listen to Joel Osteen preaching about living abundantly in this life than it is to seek out the bread of life. It’s much easier to dismiss Jesus as a mere earthly teacher than it is to worship Him as God. It’s much easier to joke about cannibalism than it is to understand what it is to eat His flesh and drink His blood. It’s much easier to accept and embrace all the false religions of the world than it is to look at a non-Christian neighbor and tell him that he is wrong. And so rather than standing firm in the confession of the Church, it’s much easier to fall away than it is to suffer all things. It’s much more pleasant to be “loving” and “kind” and “open-minded” than it is to confess that there is only one truth.

Hear again the words of St. Paul, “Let no one deceive you. Walk as children of light, worthy of the calling with which you were called, no longer as children, no longer tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine and human cunning.” There are many people in this world who want you to turn your back on Christ and to stop walking with Him, and they are all spurned on by Satan himself. He does not want you fed with the bread of life. He does not want you believing in the One sent from God. He does not want you standing with the disciples, knowing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He wants you to be scandalized by the Word of God, eating from the manna of the Law rather than feasting upon the true food and true drink of the Gospel. Truly, you will certainly have the devil around you, who with his lying and murdering day and night will let you have no peace, within or without.

But the Father has chosen you. He has led you away from the man of destruction toward His own Son. The very Word of God spoken at creation, on Sinai, and in the covenant is the same Word that was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary; and Mary did not consider whether or not she wanted this holy Child. Instead, she submitted to the will of God and said, “Let it be to me according to your word.”

In the holy incarnation of our Lord, eternal God inseparably united Himself with mortal flesh. The Son of God became also the Son of Man, born under the Law to redeem all men. Jesus Christ lived a perfect, sin-free human life so that He could go to the cross as the perfect, sin-laden sacrifice and give His flesh and blood on behalf of many. He died one death once for all, and He rose again from the dead to give life to all who would believe in His name.

This is the true confession of the Church. Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. By His death He has redeemed you, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won you from all

sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. And by His resurrection He has assured you that one day you also will rise, body and soul united and living for all eternity.

So when sin, death, and the devil rage about you, as with Mary and Peter and all the prophets and apostles, let it be unto you according to the Word of God. This saying is not hard: whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. Believe and know that there is nothing that the adversary can do to you when you stand clothed in the white garment of Christ's righteousness. The evil foe has been drowned in the blessed flood of water and the Word, and through this washing you have been eternally joined into the very death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So also when you gather together as the body of Christ, let it be unto you according to the Word of God. This saying is not hard: if you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven. When your pastors stand before you and speak the words of absolution, believe and know that your sins are forgiven before God in heaven. Through the Office of the Holy Ministry and these men whom you have called, Jesus reaches out to you and bestows upon you the very forgiveness that He won for you on the cross.

And when you gather at this altar, let it be unto you according to the Word of God. This saying is not hard: this IS My body given for you; this IS My blood shed for you for the remission of sins. Here the Wisdom from on high has prepared a table before you and called to you to come and eat of His bread and drink of the wine that He has prepared. When you receive the bread and the wine of Holy Communion, believe and know that you are receiving the very body and blood of Christ. This is no allegory or symbol. This is a sure and certain promise from God. What you receive in your hands and mouth is the same flesh and blood poured out on the cross, the very bread of life. Through this eating and drinking combined with faith in these

words, “Given and shed for you,” you have exactly what Christ promises: the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

All of these gifts from God can be summed up in one more confession of the Church, again from the words of St. Peter, words which you sing on a regular basis: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. The Word spoken to you in Baptism, Absolution, and Communion is the Word of Christ Jesus. There is no other Word to which you could turn that could grant you life the way that He does. And this Word of life is given to you freely by the Father so that you might be joined to His Son through the work of the Holy Spirit. This Word is not hard at all: your sins are forgiven; your life in the resurrection is secure.

I speak these words to you in great joy though also with great sadness. The time has come for Sarah and me to pack our things and head back to Fort Wayne for one more year. There are no greater words that I could leave with you than what we heard from St. Paul: Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. To the true Bread of Life be all glory, now until the day that we meet again in His kingdom.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.