

“You Have the Words of Eternal Life”

In the name of him whose Words to us are Spirit and life, dear friends in Christ: What came first, the chicken or the egg? I'm sure you've heard that question before. It's the classic dilemma. If you answer the chicken, you'll be asked, "Where did it come from if not from an egg?" And if you answer the egg, you'll be asked, "Where did it come from if not laid by a chicken?" I suppose that there needed to be a rooster involved as well. Even so, it seems to be a question that's impossible to answer. Of course, for we who believe the Bible's account of a six day creation, the solution is easy. We're told that on the fifth day the Lord created the fish of the sea and the birds of the air; and while chickens aren't known as great flyers that go soaring through the air, they still qualify as birds. But then, after having created the birds and fish, the Lord commanded them to be fruitful and to multiply, which they did. So there's your answer: chickens first, then eggs.

The reason I bring this up is that there is a similar dilemma that pertains to the Christian faith. It's this: do we know and trust in Jesus because we first believe in the truth and authority of the Bible – the book that tells us who Jesus is and what he's done for us, or do we believe in the truth and authority of the Bible because we first know and trust Jesus? Which is it? Unlike the chicken and the egg question, this one's answer seems (on the surface, anyway) to be more obvious. I mean, if you don't believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word and that it's absolutely true, then why would you believe anything it says about Jesus? And based on this notion, especially when dealing with unbelievers, many Christians assume that it's first necessary to convince them of the truth of the Bible before moving on to share what the Bible actually says. Get them to believe that the Bible is true and right, show them the accuracy of the history it records, and how its prophecies have been fulfilled and what not, and then they'll be able believe what it says about Jesus. And that sounds right; but is it? We find the answer in today's Gospel lesson.

What we have is the capstone and climax of Jesus' famous Bread of Life discourse that appears in the sixth chapter of John. We've been going through it in the Gospel readings for the past several weeks; so let me refresh your memory and try to bring it altogether. The chapter begins with the miraculous feeding of the 5000, in which Jesus in the wilderness on the remote eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee takes five loaves of bread and two fish and multiplies them to feed a huge crowd that's followed him to that desolate place. Not surprisingly, the crowd is very impressed with this miracle. They're thinking, "Here's a guy who can feed us for free and with no work involved on our part." And in that age when food was scarce, very labor intensive to produce, and its supply was always a bit doubtful, that was huge. They wanted to make Jesus their king right then and there. "As long as you feed us, we'll do whatever you say."

But Jesus wasn't interested in being that kind of worldly bread king – a king people follow with their bellies rather than with the devotion of their hearts and minds. So, as it was nearing nightfall that day, he had his disciples load up the boat and he sent them back to Capernaum. Meanwhile he stayed behind to dismiss the crowd. And then, having sent them on their merry way, he went up on a mountain alone to pray. But seeing all this, a large part of the crowd didn't disband and go home. Instead, they camped out at the base of mountain. Their plan was to wait for their meal ticket to return so they could hit him up again for a bite. What they didn't know was that very early in the morning, while it was still dark and they were all

asleep, Jesus slipped down off the mountain and then he walked across the surface of the lake, catching up to the disciples in their boat. He continued with them back to Capernaum.

So the crowd wakes up in the morning hoping that Jesus will soon reappear and serve them breakfast. Like I said, they don't know that he's gone. We're not told how long they stand there waiting, but eventually they give up and go home. Many of them end up back in Capernaum, where they are happily surprised to find Jesus teaching in the synagogue. Then it's: "Great! Jesus, we're glad we found you. We're not sure how you got here; but that doesn't matter. We're hungry. How about whipping up some more bread for us?"

Jesus tells them, "Look, you're coming to me for the wrong reason. I'm not here to give you bread. If all you eat is regular old bread, eventually you're going to die. I'm here to give you the Bread of Life. If you eat of this Bread, you'll live forever." Now, what Jesus is trying to do is to steer them away from thinking in merely earthly and physical terms. He's trying to direct them to the greater spiritual realities he wants to teach them: things that have to do with his mission to save the world from sin and death by giving his life on the cross as an atoning sacrifice; but they're not getting it. To be more precise, they don't want to get it. All they can think of is their immediate fleshly concerns. They're hungry. And when they hear him speak of a Bread of Life that truly satisfies, they say, "Cool. Sounds good; we'll have some of that then" – again, thinking of it as merely another kind of earthly bread to cram into their insatiable maws.

This is where today's reading picks up. Jesus tells them, "No, I'm not talking about bread like you buy at a bakery; *I* am the Living Bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats *this* Bread, he will live forever. And the Bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

This really rocks them back on their heels. Jesus has chosen a very graphic description that sounds like base cannibalism to describe what it means to have faith in him – to live from his self sacrifice – in order to try to break through to them, to get them to understand that he's talking about something far greater than where they're going to get their next meal. And to a certain degree, it works. They start asking each other, "What's he talking about? How is he going to give us his flesh to eat?" This is good. He wants them to ask that question so that they'll begin to see that he means something more than meets the eye – that there's a huge spiritual dimension to his words.

And to drive the point home Jesus continues with even more graphic language: "I tell you the truth, 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 on the last day." These words would have hit them hard. First you have a continuation of what sounds like rank cannibalism. That's offensive in its own right. Second you have the addition of drinking blood, which to Jews would have been especially objectionable. The Law of God forbade the consumption of blood in any form. The reason given was that the life of an animal was in its blood, and the life belonged to God. Therefore Jews scrupulously avoided it. They made sure that any meat they ate was thoroughly drained; the blood reverently poured out on the ground as an offering to the Lord. But if the blood of mere animals was off limits, how much more would be the blood of a human? For Jesus to speak of drinking his blood would have repulsed them. But the kicker was the word Jesus used for "feeding" on his flesh. He switches from the usual and most generic word for eating to one that's far more descriptive. It's a word that means to tear with the teeth and gnaw noisily, like you might use to describe a pack of hyenas ripping into the carcass of a kill. That's the picture he paints with his words. And all this

was intended to shock them out of their very narrow and concrete way of thinking. It was to get them to ask that most Lutheran of questions: "What does this mean?"

And Jesus doesn't leave those who are wondering hanging in suspense. He goes on to explain, "My flesh is *true* food, and my blood is *true* drink." He's saying, "*I* am what you really live on. *I* am the true source and sustenance of your life. I am food and drink for your soul. You want to live? Come to me. Believe in me. Trust in me and the words that I give you; and you will live. Forever."

He further explains how it works with an analogy. "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so also whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me." With these words Jesus begins to unravel a bit of the mystery of the Godhead. The Father is the Father precisely because he gives of himself, hands over his own divine essence, in the eternal begetting of the Son. The Father is forever giving himself, sacrificing himself, for the Son's existence. In a similar way, the Son, Jesus, gives himself both spiritually, namely his powerful Word and divine Spirit, and physically, that is his very human body and blood on the cross so that we can live. Jesus is saying that in the same way that I am 100 percent dependent upon my Father, so you are 100 percent dependent upon me.

And for what follows, it's helpful to understand that Jesus is speaking to essentially three different groups of people. The first are those who came to him only looking for another bite to eat. In general, they are baffled by his words. They still don't get it. And when they finally figure out that he's not going to feed them another meal like they want, they're through with him. His words sound like crazy talk to them. They go away in disappointment and disgust.

Then there are others in the synagogue who consider themselves to be his disciples. They are not among the 12, but rather are part of that larger group of followers who traveled around with Jesus in the early portion of his ministry. They've been listening to him for some time now. They know him to be a mighty miracle worker and prophet of God, and they realize that his words are often to be understood on a deeper level. The trouble is that not only do they not like the way Jesus says what he does about eating his flesh and drinking his blood – it sounds rather gross to them, after all – even more, they don't like what he means by it—or at least what little they understand of what he means. The very idea of being 100 percent dependent on someone else is an offense to the sinful mind. The fallen nature in all of us causes us to think of ourselves as good, and worthy of God's recognition, and independently productive in a spiritual sense. "I can do it on my own, thank you very much. I don't need anyone or anything to help me." And we see this from the time we are very little, and we try to grab that spoon away from a parent who's feeding us so we can do it ourselves, to the time we are very old. Then the worst thing we can imagine is getting to the point that we are unable to take care of ourselves. And when it comes to that it's, "I feel so useless. I hate having to depend on others." Uh-huh. That's the way it always is our whole lives through. There is never even a fraction of a second when our lives do not depend entirely on the mercy and sustaining of the Lord. But we sure hate to be reminded of it. And so when Jesus says as much, these would-be disciples of his are deeply offended at his words. "Just who does this Jesus think he is, anyway?" They too leave him. They don't want any part of him anymore.

And so Jesus turns to the last group, his 12 chosen. "What about you guys," he asks. "You don't want to leave me too, do you?" It's Peter who speaks for all of them when he replies, "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."

Now, please understand: Peter and the others didn't like what Jesus said either. They were sinners like everyone else, and so they too were offended at his words. And I think it's fair to say that they too failed to comprehend most of what he was saying – especially at the time. They didn't yet understand about the cross Christ would have to carry for our sins. They didn't yet believe in his resurrection. They didn't know about his Ascension or about how the Spirit would come upon them at Pentecost; they knew nothing about the Church he would use them to establish, or how they would take his saving Gospel into all the world where it would be received most enthusiastically by Gentiles – people the 12 disciples would have at this time considered not worth even trying to save. They didn't understand about the Sacraments: how through water people would be united with Jesus in his death and resurrection, or how under bread and wine Jesus really would give his body as true food and his blood as true drink. They didn't know or understand any of this. And yet they believed in Jesus. They knew who he was: the Son of God. And they trusted in him in despite the hard, objectionable, and completely mysterious things he had to say.

And this goes back to our original question: Do we know and trust in Jesus because we first believe in the truth and authority of the Bible – God's Word that tells us who Jesus is and what he's done for us, or do we believe in the truth and authority of the Bible because we first know and trust Jesus? The answer is now clear: first we come to know Jesus. Through God's Word and the power of the Spirit, we first come to trust in him. This happened to most of us when we were baptized. That's when and where the Father called us and gave us the gift of faith in Christ. And then through our knowledge and faith in Jesus, we were made able – again with the Spirit's aid – to believe and understand what's recorded for us in the Bible. To be sure, without faith in Christ, the Bible cannot be believed or understood. The key to understanding it is faith in Jesus as the Son of God and the only hope of salvation.

And thus we make it our goal as we read and study the Scriptures not to attempt to understand every mystery; but rather to know Christ better, who reveals himself in and through the Word. We can live with things we don't understand, trusting that in time the Lord will reveal what he wants us to know. And when sharing the Word with others, we needn't try to explain every apparent discrepancy or prove every historical detail. We don't have to demonstrate that the Word of God is true. Rather we make it our goal is to introduce people to Jesus, to tell who he is and what he's done to secure for us forgiveness and life eternal. That's how the Lord calls and gathers disciples. That's how he makes believers. And then, with us, knowing and trusting Jesus, they too will be able to believe in the truth of God's Word and understand it. Then they will stand with us as together we look to Jesus and say, "Lord, you have the words of eternal life." May he speak them to our hungry hearts now and always. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!