

Pentecost 13, Year B

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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

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A year ago I lost my beloved father. In the depths of profound grief I found myself wading in the hardest questions of our faith, why do bad things happen to good people, how do we find comfort in the midst of heartache, and what is eternal life really?!

In the first half of my life I experienced a hodgepodge of faiths, confirmed in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, a deep dive into Catholicism, and Evangelical and Southern Baptism for a time during my years in the south. This kaleidoscope faith led me to view eternal life as what happens after we die. God's promise that we will live forever after we die in His heavenly kingdom. And it seems I am not alone! N.T. Wright in his book *Surprised by Hope* says "Many Christians grow up assuming that whenever the New Testament speaks about heaven it refers to the place to which the saved will go after death."

But when we look at our Gospel story today is that all that Jesus is talking about when he says "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever"?

Jesus is speaking to the Jews who have followed him into Capernaum after he nourished their bodies in the feeding of the 5,000. Carrying on his metaphor of bread and drink he is endeavoring to make the Jews understand a concept that goes far beyond the simple one of nourishing our physical bodies, he wants them to understand how he, "the bread of life" has come to nourish and give life to the whole world, to defeat death and give eternal life.

Jesus invokes the promise that those who eat of him will be raised up on the last day. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day" If we stop there we are tempted to feel confirmed in the belief that Jesus only came to save souls for a someday future in God's heavenly kingdom. But Jesus does not end there! He carries on in telling the Jews "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

Jesus is speaking to them in the present tense! Eat me, I am sustenance for you now! I will fill you and you will be in me! Of course he doesn't mean food that is the same as the loaves and fishes he has just fed them. He means the food that gives all life. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven"

During my graduate school years, my father and I met weekly for lunch on our mutual university campus. We started at a tiny, fancy but delicious restaurant until my mom got wind of how much we were spending on these lunches and wisely advised us to find another spot. We moved to the campus coffee shop where my father showed up each week with his turkey sandwich on whole wheat bread wrapped in wax paper. Over lunch we shared our mutual worries about sick family members, talked over my hopes and dreams for being a social worker, chatted about trips we wanted to take someday and shared in the day to day challenges of work and school. These lunches were our pause each week

to eat together and be filled in the presence and love shared between father and daughter, parent and child.

God, our creator, desires to fill us even more fully! Just as a parent longs to support their child and fill them with love. God who is alpha and omega. God almighty. God who is love. God, who is eternal life, became mortal in Jesus so that he could give us eternal life bringing God's kingdom to earth to be present to us now. In today's Gospel we are told, this gift of eternal life is given to us to consume as bread and drink, flesh and blood! To fill every piece of us! Jesus tells us that his flesh is "true food and my blood true drink."

Craig Satterlee, Bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, describes eternal life "as being in close communion with Jesus. Eternal life is to remain in Jesus and to have Jesus remain in us. We take Christ's body and blood into our mouths, into our stomachs, into our bodies, so that Christ remains in us and we remain in Christ. As we eat and drink, Christ moves us closer to himself. Christ moves us closer to the very life of God. Christ moves us closer to himself, so close that we are as intimate with Jesus as the Father is with the Son."

Eternal life breaks into our present reality joining us with Christ now! Right here! In this moment, in whatever you are struggling with, whatever is leaving you empty, worried or lost, God's heavenly kingdom inaugurated in Jesus and one day fulfilled by God, is present to us in the body and blood of Christ.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them."

Eternity dips into our present reality. We become members and partakers in God's heavenly kingdom here and now. Jesus gave his life "for the life of the world." He wants us to feast on him to be filled and to carry that nourishment out into the world so we can be participants in God's heavenly kingdom that began in Jesus and will one day be fulfilled "on earth as it is in heaven."

You see, before Christ died on the cross, he lived "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father" Jesus lived a life of loving and healing. He died so that he could "abide in us and us in him!" so we could live a life of love, being nourished, filled completely, by his loving presence and participate in God's kingdom here on earth by nourishing others. We are participants in God's kingdom that began in Jesus, and one day will be fulfilled by God.

In the depths of grief after my father's death, I found the eternal life Jesus speaks of. When the loneliness and pain of grief became so much that I could no longer see or feel Christ abiding in me, I received His nourishing presence in the food delivered by members of this parish to feed our family, in the God breathed words of a caring priest, in the presence of companions on the journey of grief who offered their time, compassion and prayers.

Jesus abides in us and us in him.

We do not have to wait for a someday future salvation to experience the eternal life Christ speaks of in today's gospel. What Jesus offers us in the giving of His flesh and blood for us to feast on is life now!

God's Kingdom breaks into the present to nourish us, comfort us and fill us with His love and peace and to allow us to comfort, heal and nourish others.

Jesus abides in us and us in him.

When life's challenges, its pains and sorrows, the uncertainties we face overcome us, Christ is in us.

Jesus abides in us and us in him.

As we kneel at the communion table today know that Jesus, who cares both about our physical and spiritual needs, is present. He is made known to us and remains in us so that we may be nourished in our emptiness and so that we may nourish and love one another. Amen.