

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

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"*** (John 6:51).

Imagine yourself among this crowd in Capernaum. You have been a disciple of Jesus for some time and then, suddenly, the Man you have been following calls Himself bread and He calls on you to eat Him. What would be going through your mind? Would you be thinking: *What a fool! This guy must have lost His mind! This Man is preposterous!*

How could Jesus say such a thing? Now, for sure, this crowd had recently had their fill of the loaves. They had just eaten physical bread. But now Jesus is calling Himself bread! On top of that, Jesus is now saying: ***"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"*** (John 6:53-56). If the crowd was thinking Jesus was possibly crazy before, now most see Him as a nut! To most in the crowd, this teaching was too hard to accept. Jesus' words make no sense to human reason. So, Jesus says, ***"Do you take offense at this?"*** (John 6:61) – ***"Do My Words offend you?"***

By Jesus saying that His followers must feed on His flesh and drink His blood, He was teaching the importance of continuing to nurture faith in Him. He says this later in John 8: ***"If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"*** (John 8:31-32).

So, when faith is nourished by Jesus in His Means of Grace, His Word and Sacraments, the believer remains in Jesus and Jesus in the believer. So, in our faith, we are united with Christ. Now, this is something that we cannot explain. We just know it because Jesus said so. So, when a person eats of, that is, clings to Jesus, that person lives because of Jesus.

Jesus is bread. He is the bread, come down from heaven, sent from the Father. Whoever eats the bread, that is, trusts in Jesus, has eternal life. And He will raise that person up at the Last Day. This is what Jesus is saying. But what is the crowd hearing?

For most in the crowd, they took offense at Jesus' words. They grumbled at Jesus' words. ***"This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"*** (John 6:60).

For the worldly minded, they could not understand Jesus' teaching. And this is not surprising, since they were depending on *their* flesh, trusting *their* own reasoning for understanding. They were looking for a "bread king" to give them more food to eat. They were not expecting Jesus to call Himself bread and that they must eat of Him to have eternal life. This teaching was just too hard for many of them to swallow, so many decided to just spit Jesus out and walk away and no longer walk with Him.

Jesus referring to Himself as the Bread of Life, the Living Bread come down from heaven, is just one of His many difficult teachings to swallow. Jesus never avoided hard teachings as to avoid upsetting His hearers. There are so many more Biblical teachings that upset people: from homosexuality, to abortion, to cohabitation, to divorce, to close (or closed) communion, to forgiveness, to suffering, and on and on.

As your pastor, it would be much easier if I avoided those difficult Biblical teachings, but if I avoid those hard teachings, I would not be doing my pastoral duty. Jesus calls upon all of His undershepherds to ***"preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience in teaching"*** (2 Timothy 4:2). As Christians, as disciples of Christ, we should not be ashamed of Christ and His teachings.

For many new Christians, they have gotten the wrong idea that the Christian life is an easy life. This false teaching is quite popular with televangelists who say things like: ***"Suddenly things will change. Suddenly, God will bring your hopes and dreams."*** But Jesus never said that. In fact, Jesus warns us that we will face trials and tribulations throughout our life, especially since we are in Christ. He says, ***"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"*** (John 16:33).

Forgiveness, too, is a hard teaching. St. Peter came up to Jesus and asked Him, ***"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"*** Jesus said to him, ***"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times"*** (Matthew 18:21-22). Forgiveness can be a hard pill to swallow, but forgiveness is a continuous and essential part of being a follower of Christ.

Something as simple as worshiping together can be considered a hard teaching. I have heard it many times, *“I can worship God in my own way. I don’t have to come to church.”* Yes, it is possible to worship God in nature, but what is missing? Fellowshiping around the Means of Grace and community. We cannot face life’s challenges alone. We are meant to lean on each other, to build up each other, and encourage each other in the faith.

Another hard teaching is suffering. No one likes to suffer. It’s uncomfortable and painful. But God uses your sufferings to make you stronger in the faith. St. Paul writes, ***“We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us”*** (Romans 5:3-5).

Now, quite possibly, one of *the* hardest teachings of all is close or closed communion. So, let’s dive into the deep end! You know it’s a hard teaching when it’s right there for all to see and read inside our service folders. Over the years, I have heard some say: *“The LCMS acts like the Lord’s Table is an exclusive club!”* *“Holy Communion should only be between yourself and God.”*

Today’s culture is all about individualism and autonomy, and the Lord’s Supper is no different. For many, the Sacrament of the Altar has become a matter of personal entitlement. But the issue of admission to the Lord’s Supper is not a matter of personal entitlement or of being a welcoming and affirming church. The issue is the nature of the Sacrament and the character of the church. The issue is if we take Christ seriously or not.

As unloving as close, or closed, communion may sound to our sinful hearts, this is a loving practice. And practically every Christian church abided in this practice until the last century. God’s Word teaches that those who receive the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner eat and drink to their harm and not their blessing. Unworthy participation is not discerning our need for forgiveness in the Sacrament and the shared confession and faith of the Sacrament (Acts 2:44).

So, we would be unloving to commune those who would receive the Lord’s Supper to their harm. Afterall, Jesus gives His Supper as a blessing, not a curse. So, abiding in Christ can cause pain among family and friends, but where we have differences, we pray for the day when those differences cease.

There are so many hard teachings. God's Word says that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. So, for those who remain in their sins, by not seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with one another, they will reap what they sowed as Jesus says, ***"They will be thrown into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"*** (Matthew 13:50).

For many people, these teachings are just too hard, too difficult, and to their sinful hearts, they sound so wrong, so they choose to just walk away from Jesus.

On that day Jesus said He was the Living Bread come down from heaven, most walked away. But then Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked them, ***"Do you want to go away as well?"*** Now, Jesus expected them to abide with Him, but He allowed them to answer for themselves whether they too would now leave. You see, Jesus does not coerce people to follow Him.

Simon Peter answered Jesus, ***"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"*** (John 6:68). Christ's apostles could not imagine leaving Jesus. And the reason was simple: Jesus had the words that gave eternal life. The words of Jesus about the Bread of Life, His descending from heaven, His flesh and blood, conveyed the blessing He promised for them. The disciples believed and had eternal life from God.

Yes, following Jesus is tough; abiding in His teachings is tough. But as Christians, we are to be like Peter and say, ***"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*** Yes, many of Christ's teachings are not what our sinful nature would like to hear, but it's what we need to hear, since He is the Living Bread come down from heaven who alone gives eternal life. So, where else can we go to receive eternal life? Where else can we go? Jesus alone is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life!

In many ways, this is the hardest teaching. For it is only Jesus who would suffer the wrath of God for us sinners. He suffered and died the punishment that we all deserve. He substituted Himself for you so that you may live forever! You are forgiven and may we always seek more forgiveness by abiding in Him as you grow closer to Him in His Means of Grace! For He who said it is trustworthy and true, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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