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The Joy of Eating

The 12th Sunday After Pentecost: 2 Samuel 18:24-33, Psalm 102:1-12, Ephesians 5:15-20, John 6:51-58. A sermon preached on August 18th at Knox Presbyterian Church by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson.

In 1963 President John F. Kennedy travelled to West Berlin where he made a now famous speech before the infamous Berlin wall. At the climax of that impassioned address the president paused and then cried out, "*Ich bin ein Berliner!*" The crowd that day was swept up in the emotion of his words and ignored their meaning until later. Kennedy had wanted to say, "*Ich bin Berliner!*" or "I am a Berliner!" But what he actually said was, "*Ich bin ein Berliner!*" or "I am a jelly doughnut!"

What Jesus said in our Gospel lesson about eating his flesh and drinking his blood sounded as ridiculous to those who heard him. What did he mean? I want to try to answer that this morning. The title of my sermon is "The Joy of Eating". I have two main points:

- I. Our need of eating.
- II. Our manner of eating.

First, our need of eating. As some of you know, Kay is a home-economics teacher. I perused some of her nutrition books looking for something that would help us understand these strange words of Christ. In one of her books I found a list entitled, "the four functions of nutrition" or "Why we need to eat". Those four functions are to sustain life; to promote growth; to replace loss; and to provide energy. Let's look at these four functions of nutrition as they relate to the words of Jesus.

We need to eat to sustain our life. I've heard it said that the whole world can be divided into two groups of people; those who eat to live and those who live to eat. I must confess that I enjoy eating. But I also eat simply to live. None of us can live without food. Early in this century experiments at Columbia University showed that with improvement in diet it's possible to increase the life span of a human being by at least 10%. The better we eat, the longer life is sustained.

Jesus makes the incredible claim that our lives might be sustained into eternity if we feed on him. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." Christ claims to be an absolutely necessary ingredient in our daily diet to sustain human life.

A second function of nutrition is to promote growth. That's what we're always telling our kids. "Eat your spinach or you won't grow up to be big and strong like Popeye." In the same way unless we feed on Christ daily we simply don't grow up to experience human life as God intended for us. About twenty years ago there was a line in one of Bob Dylan's songs, "He who is not busy being born is busy dieing." And it's also true that the one who is not busy growing is busy dieing. Unfortunately, many men and women whom Christ has claimed for his own in baptism have stunted growth; they're dieing spiritually because they feed so little on Christ.

A third function of nutrition is to replace loss. The Psalmist wrote, "I forget to eat my food; I'm reduced to skin and bones." Everyday millions of cells die in our bodies. I've read that within a seven year span every cell in our body dies and is replaced with new ones. If we don't eat, our bodies can't be restored. But the cells in our bodies aren't the only things that need to be replaced. We lose so much else. We lose our tempers. We lose our dignity. We lose touch with loved ones. We lose our good spirits. We lose our way. We lose time. We lose the joy of our salvation. We've all lost our innocence. ^{we lose intimate fellowship with God.} It's absolutely necessary for Jesus Christ to be a part of our everyday diet to restore what's been lost. "He restoreth my soul", the Psalmist said. "Renew a right spirit within me", he prayed. "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation". When we feed upon Christ he comes into our lives and restores what's been lost.

The fourth function of nutrition is to provide energy. Without

food we grow listless. We lack energy. I used to have an uncle Joe Helberg who came from Germany and never lost his accent. After he ate he'd lean back and pat his chest and say, "Now I'm full of Wim, Wigor, and Witality." Food gives us vim, vigor, and vitality. We need energy to live life to the full. And above all it takes energy to do God's will. We need energy to overcome temptation. We need energy to love our enemies. We need energy to witness to Christ. Sometimes it's hard to get up and come to church. It's hard to keep praying. So many things in life exhaust us emotionally and physically. We need the power and energy that Christ alone provides to give us vim, vigor and vitality.

II. We've seen how Christ claims to be absolutely necessary to sustain life, to promote growth, to replace loss and to provide energy. Now we need to ask *how* we feed on Christ. It's not enough simply to know that Christ is absolutely necessary for real living. How do we appropriate that life for ourselves? The Jews in our Gospel lesson couldn't answer that question. They began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Christians answer that question in two ways. We eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood sacramentally in the Lord's Supper but, most important of all, we eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood when we trust in him as our Lord and Savior.

Christians have always believed in a sacramental eating of the body and blood of Christ. The early Christians met every day to celebrate Holy Communion. A Lord's Day service without the sacrament would have been unthinkable. When those early Christians read John's Gospel they couldn't fail to hear allusions to the sacrament. Christians have argued for 2000 years about what it means to eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood in relationship to the Lord's Supper. These arguments

have caused terrible divisions in the church. Some say the bread and wine actually become the physical body and blood of Christ. Others say that the physical body and blood of Christ is given with the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Some say the bread and wine are only symbols to remind us of the death of Christ. Presbyterian and Reformed Christians believe in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. We believe that the person who has a saving faith in Christ truly feeds upon him in the sacrament though not physically. Common to all these interpretations, however, is the belief that we can't feed upon Christ cut off from others. If we want to feed upon Christ and have eternal life we've got to put aside our pride and sit down at the Lord's Table with fellow Christians.

But the church has always taught that we feed upon Christ, apart from the sacrament, when we believe in him. Throughout his Gospel John speaks interchangeably of "coming" to Christ, "feeding" on Christ and "believing" on Christ. St. Augustine, one of the foremost influences in the Roman Catholic church preached, "Believe on Christ and you've eaten him." In the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer the priest assures a sick person who's unable to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, that "if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the Cross for him, and shed his Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefor, he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth." Above all we eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood when we place our trust in him as our Lord and Savior.

Let's look a little more closely at how we eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood when we truly believe in him. *The flesh of Christ*

paints us to the full humanity of our Lord. We believe that Jesus is God in the flesh. In Jesus we see God taking human life upon himself, facing our human situation, struggling with our human problems, battling with our human temptations, relating to other human beings just like we have to. So when Jesus says we must eat his flesh he means, "Feed your heart, feed your mind, feed your soul on the thought of my humanity. When you're discouraged and in despair, when you're tired of life and beaten to your knees and disgusted with life and living-- remember and believe that I took that life of yours and these struggles of yours on me." To eat Christ's body is to believe and feed on the thought of his humanity until our humanity is strengthened and cleansed and purified and empowered by his.

The blood of Christ stands for his life. When blood flows from a wound life ebbs away. When Jesus died, his blood spilled out for the life of the world. When Jesus says, "You must drink my blood" he's saying, "You must take my life into the very centre of your being." He's saying, "I want to be at the very center of your life so that I might live my life in you." Look at it this way. Many of us have a book lying on our bookshelves that we've never read. It may be the the tragedies of Shakespeare. It may be a Harlequin romance. You may have bought that book, but as long as it remains unread it remains outside you. But then one day you take it down and read it. You're thrilled and fascinated and moved. You remember certain lines. Whenever you want, you can call up from your memory a line or a passage and feed your mind and heart on it. Once the book was external to you, on your shelf. Now it's inside you and you can feed upon it. It's the same with Jesus. Here's Jesus, the life of God. As long as he remains a figure in a book he's external to us; but when he enters into our hearts he's within us and we can feed upon his life and be sustained, and

grow, and ^{be}restored and energized.

When Jesus told us to eat his flesh and drink his blood, he was telling us to feed our hearts and souls and minds on his humanity, and he was telling us to revitalize our lives with his life until we are drenched and permeated and saturated with the life of God.

Now think for a moment about what I've said about our need of feeding on Christ. Think also about how the U.S. produces so much good food that's so cheap for most of us. But national surveys show that many of us don't eat the fruit, vegetables, and fibre we need for good health. A good many of us prefer junk food with little or no nutritional value to good food that will help sustain life, enable us to grow strong, replace our losses and give us energy. We prefer instant, pre-packaged food to what is most nutritious. And many Christians prefer junk food to Jesus Christ; we prefer entertainment to Christian worship; we prefer instant religious conversions and pre-packaged answers to nutritious food that's high in fiber, low in sugar and takes longer to prepare. We prefer candy to the medicine of immortality. Good health is not possible without Jesus Christ in our diet. He is Living Bread not a jelly donut. He is our health and salvation. Without him we die. Spiritual death isn't a punishment for not believing in Christ, rather it's the natural consequence of failing to feed upon Christ in faith. So what Jesus says to us in this chapter is of utmost importance for all of us. There's nothing more important than to feed upon Christ and have life. May God give us all grace to eat his flesh and drink his blood and live forever.

Amen

Let us pray: Almighty and everliving God, we thank you for feeding us with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament; and for assuring us that we are living members of the Body of your Son, and heirs of your eternal kingdom through faith in Christ. And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord. To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.