

**Lectionary 20 Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021**  
**August 15, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was in seminary, I was asked to write a 2-page paper based on the question, “How do we know that Jesus is present in the Lord’s Supper?” Based on the focus of this class, my job was to look at the writings of Martin Luther and his colleague Philip Melancthon, and summarize their teachings on this question.

Unfortunately for me, the answer to this question doesn’t fill two pages. The answer is simply four words long. You see the answer to the question “How do we know that Jesus is present in the Lord’s Supper?” is “Because he said so.” We know that Jesus is present in our celebration of the Eucharist simply because Jesus promises to be there.

Of course, this answer isn’t very satisfying for most people. We want to know how it works: How does Jesus get in there? Is it really body and blood? Is it still bread and wine? We—like the crowd that Jesus spoke to in today’s gospel reading—we sometimes find ourselves wondering how we get from the elements of bread and wine to Jesus’ body and blood. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”, they ask.

And Christian denominations have come up with a variety of answers to this question. Some denominations claim that the bread and wine are simply symbols of Jesus’ body and blood, but that the element don’t actually *become* the body and blood of Christ. Other denominations claim that as the words of institution are spoken —“In the night in which he was betrayed ...”—the bread and wine *transform* into body and blood and are *no longer* bread and wine, even though the physical appearance has not changed. Still other Christians claim that the bread and wine become Jesus’ body and blood, yet they also still remain bread and wine.

Now, these options in and of themselves are pretty confusing. And I promise I won’t test you on them later. Because the truth is that none of these viewpoints truly identifies the Lutheran position on the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. You see, as Lutherans, we believe that Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine; that somehow Jesus’ body and blood is there. But we give a holy and reverent “I don’t know” to the question of how it works. We claim that somehow, some way, Jesus gets himself into the bread and wine, and Jesus’ body and blood are distributed at communion. And all of this happens simply because Jesus promises that it is so. Jesus says, “I am the living bread from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Or, “Take, eat; this is my body, given for you. ...Drink, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”

Jesus promises to be present when we celebrate the Eucharist. We don’t know how it works, but we know that God keeps God’s promises. The logistics don’t matter; that’s up to God. And while my professor wasn’t interested in opinions and new ideas (he simply wanted us to demonstrate mastery of the material), a far more important question is, “so what?” “So, what does this all mean?” is a far better question than “How does it work?”. Whenever I am asked the question, “Why is there suffering in this world?” My answer is again a holy and reverent “I don’t know.” But then I continue and say, “But what I do know is that God is with us in our suffering. There is no suffering so deep or a trouble so terrible that God cannot walk with us. God walks with us in our suffering.” Knowing why there is suffering or how Jesus gets into the bread is far less interesting and important than knowing what these things mean for us, for our lives, and for

our world. The “So what?” question is a question of faith, a question of purpose, a question of meaning.

So instead of asking “How do we know that Jesus is present in the Lord’s Supper? or like the crowd in today’s gospel reading, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”, perhaps we should be asking, “What does it mean for us that Jesus is present in the Lord’s Supper?” *That* is a far more interesting, important, and relevant question. And, this is the question that Jesus seems to answer in our reading today.

Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in my and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.”

It simply doesn’t matter how it works. And as long as you’re not writing a seminary paper, all you need to know is that Jesus promises to be truly present in the bread and wine. And so, in today’s reading, Jesus tells us something far more important: that Jesus gives himself—his own flesh and blood—so that when we eat it, we receive the gift of eternal life. The bread and wine on the altar today, the body and blood of Christ, contain in them God’s gift of eternal life.

But there’s more to this story than a promise of eternal life at the end of time. Jesus calls himself the bread of life, and that matters not just for some time in the future, but it also matters to us each and every day. We have seen and heard in this chapter that this bread not only gives eternal life, but this bread also gives abundant life. The bread that Christ gives is enough to feed 5,000 people and still have more to share. The bread that Christ gives is bread that promises to feed us always, so that we might never be hungry. The bread that Christ gives strengthens and sustains us in this life, and the bread that Christ gives carries us into eternal life. Jesus is the bread of life—the bread that brings us abundant, eternal life, now and forevermore.

When we gather at the Lord’s Table, we receive this tangible, truly present gift of Jesus. Jesus comes to us to give us life...strength, courage, passion, hope, love....and all those things that we need to live abundantly in this world. This gift is given freely to each and every one of us. With Christ, the living bread in us, we are empowered to speak out for justice and peace and life for all people.

And so, when we receive the bread and wine at communion, know that Christ is present with you. Don’t worry about how it happens. Instead, know this: at this table, Christ speaks to each one of us, saying, “This is my body, given *for you*.” These gifts are *for you*. These gifts are so that you will have abundant and eternal life now and forever. So, come to the feast. Come, receive the living bread from heaven that gives us life. Thanks be to God. Amen.