

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 20  
August 19, 2018  
John 6:51-58

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### **Foretaste or Sustenance?**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What a blessing it was to hear that Paula Ionescu was getting a new kidney just over a week ago. Paula is one of our quieter members. She is a lovely woman, who has dealt with considerable hardship during her life--immigrating from Romania, dealing with misdiagnosis and unnecessary medication for many years, divorce, and very limited resources. Paula thinks that the medications contributed to her diabetes, which led to a need for dialysis. It has been nearly six years now that she has had to go for dialysis three times each week. It has been very hard on her, as it is on anyone in her circumstances.

I asked Paula if I could tell her story, because it speaks well to today's gospel about eternal life. It was only at the end of July that Paula had asked me to prepare documents for her—a living will and others—because she had had enough. She was going to “pull the plug” in the form of stopping dialysis and letting nature take its course. She had decided to die, yielding under the immense burdens of her life, and knowing that she remained in God's care whether she was in this life or the next,

Only days later, on Wednesday, August 8<sup>th</sup>, she got the call saying that a kidney was available for her. Here's what she said when I asked her for permission to tell her story, just a week after surgery: “It's more than a gift of life. It's a miracle!”

Indeed. And the entire congregation rejoices with Paula as she recovers from surgery, free from the weekly grind of being attached to machines for many hours and working to reshape her new life.

Let me pause here in order to thank Susan Krieg and Kaye Hill for their stalwart assistance to Paula over the past many months. They have also been overseeing volunteers who are caring for Paula 24/7 for the initial critical two weeks in her apartment and providing transportation to Indianapolis twice a week for the first month or so to monitor progress. It is no small wonder in itself to see so many helping gladly and freely. Thank you all for this labor of Christian love and service for one among us for whom her church is virtually her only family.

Now, why does this story come to mind as I consider today's gospel? Because it addresses directly and somewhat cryptically the matter of eternal life.

Eternal life. Is it about the renewed life that Paula is now beginning to experience? Or it is about the life that follows this one and into which only a couple of weeks ago she desired to be released?

As I have noted from the pulpit on other occasions, it irks me greatly that Christianity in the western world has been hijacked almost entirely by those who portray it as about the afterlife far more than it is about this life. I consider that to be heretical in the extreme.

So let me turn to the gospel of John before us—and in a couple of other places—to make this point for me.

In today's story, Jesus says some things about eternal life using the metaphor of bread.

- I am the living bread that came down 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.
- Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.
- Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.
- Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.
- Whoever eats me will live because of me.
- This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

Let me just say that for a gospel writer who does not have a story of Jesus consecrating the elements of bread and wine at that final Passover meal into the elements of Communion, he has an awful lot to say that seems clearly to refer to that sacrament. For those of you who don't remember, John is the one who tells the story of the washing of the disciples' feet on that Maundy Thursday evening before his crucifixion. John omits the references to bread and body, wine and blood, and remembrance. And yet, the sacrament is clearly on his mind at several points.

I'll paraphrase those several verses for you in the context of present vs. eternal life.

- Jesus is the living bread, the one of whom we partake for the life of the world.
- Partaking in Jesus confers life.
- Those who eat and drink have eternal life, to be raised up at the last.
- Those who commune with Christ abide in him and he in us.
- Whoever eats lives.
- The bread that Jesus offers is manna, but its sustenance exceeds that provided the Israelites in the wilderness. It confers life that abides forever.

So, does this eternal life that Jesus speaks about refer to life in the here and now? Or does it presage life after death? Is this passage—and the biblical idea of eternal life—about foretastes of heaven, which is our primary religious objective, or about sustaining manna, giving us a true and good life, enriching us for our daily work and play? Foretaste of what is to come or manna for the journey?

Here's a story of foretaste:

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. So as she was getting her things in order, she contacted her pastor. She told her which songs she wanted sung at the service, what scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in. The woman also requested that she be buried with her favorite bible. As the pastor prepared to leave, the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her.

"There's one more thing," she said excitedly.

"What's that?"

"This is very important," the woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand."

"Whatever for?" asked the pastor.

"Well, in all my years of attending church socials and potluck dinners (must have been a Lutheran), when the dishes were cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'Keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming... like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful and of substance! So I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them: 'Keep your fork... the best is yet to come.'

Nice little story, huh? And a compelling image.

Now, listen to an image related to manna for the journey.

"I went from the horse-and-buggy to a man walking on the moon," said the elderly man to his granddaughter. But then he mused, "I never thought it would be so short."

Life is short, and many of us turn to Jesus because we want to live forever. That's not bad, but we don't comprehend what eternal life really is. We tend to crave the wrong things. We long for something better, and we think it's just ahead. If only I were out of school. If only I had that job. If only I were married. If only I could retire. If only . . . And then one day we catch an echo of our grandfather's voice as we wonder where the time has flown.

When we live in Christ, we enjoy life to its fullest every day. We possess eternal life now. The apostle Paul wrote, "The law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2).

It is one of life's great lies that we need to be somewhere else, doing something else, with someone else before we start truly living. When we walk with Jesus, we

exchange regret over life's brevity for the full enjoyment of life in the Spirit, in the present. (Tim Gustafson, "Insight," adapted)

Foretaste of what is to come or manna for the journey?

Both, of course. But let's please get over this idea that Christianity is primarily about "pie in the sky by and by." Please, let's taste and see that the Lord is good today, feeding us with bread, warming us with wine, abiding with us as a lifelong companion in this amazing pilgrimage through life—encouraging, cajoling, inspiring, enlightening, calling, befriending, forgiving, correcting, loving.

There is so much work that is yet to be done to make the foretastes of the kingdom become real in this world that we ought hardly have a moment to even consider looking off beyond the horizon of this life. And in these days, it seems to me that the calls of God towards kingdom values—honesty, righteousness, mutual respect, the common good, justice with mercy, and compassion for all people—these calls press in hard upon us.

Praise God that there is manna for this journey—AND that we have foretastes of where that journey might lead. Praise God that we gather around the altar of Christ each Sunday to receive this holy food and drink for the sake of the world. May it imbue our lives with life eternal, knowing who and whose we are as we help God give holy shape to this world. May it nurture our souls with hope, our hearts with zeal, and our steps with a bit of bounce.

May we keep that other line from John in our minds and in our hearts at every moment. John 10:10 – "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

To paraphrase Paula's response to receiving a new lease on life in the form of a kidney, "Life is more than a gift. It's a miracle!" May we all treat each day as such. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.