

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 19 (Proper 15)

A choice is set before us today. John records in the verses that immediately follow the Gospel lesson that many left Jesus after his radical and revolting words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Proverbs speaks of Lady Wisdom setting out a feast, a feast which we can consume and thereby become wise. Joshua exhorts the children of Israel to choose to follow God with him and his house.

This just doesn't sound Lutheran! Who let the Arminians with their decision theology in here? I was always taught to cover my ears and flee at the sound of anyone talking about a decision for Jesus. Oh rats, that sola scriptura thing is getting in the way of my neat systematic theology again. I hate it when that happens, it just makes me so uncomfortable. Why can't God's Word just stick to the program!?

The Bible does talk about people making decisions, it does recognize that we are people who have a free will and who are able to decide things. I know Luther spoke of a will in bondage, but Luther was not a determinist who said that we were in an absolute bondage. Our lives and relationship with God are not predetermined nor are we incapable of a decision. What Luther said was that we had the ability to choose, we just always chose the wrong thing unless God was involved.

The truth is, and the Bible recognizes this, for many adults, their introduction to Jesus and the Faith feels a lot like a decision, in fact it is a decision. In the same way that I can decide upon coming home from my office on a hot day and decide to have a beer. I did not decide that it was a hot day, nor did I decide to be thirsty, nor did I decide to like beer. I made a decision amid all these sorts of things. I could have had a glass of water and my doctor might agree with my wife that it is a better choice. That said, the choice which Proverbs and John speak of is a choice of a wholly other category than the one which involves the bottle of beer in my refrigerator. The easiest way to understand the boundary is to say that I have a free will about those things which are directed to things which are equal to or below me. I chose to marry a particular woman. I choose how I will spend my day, etc. The choices which are directed upward, however, are of another sort altogether. There, as Luther said, my will is captive. I cannot of my own free will come Jesus or believe in him, but must be called, gathered, enlightened, and rendered holy by the Holy Spirit of God.

The choice which people make at the beginning of their faith walk is not a choice in a vacuum and Luther wants us all to remember that here. It was God who awoke within the person the hunger and thirst for Jesus. It was God who created the appetite which reaches to Jesus. It is the Spirit who lowers the barriers of fear and natural rebellion so that the sinner can lift his eyes and look up to Jesus and say "Yes, Lord." True, the credit for the "Yes" does indeed belong to Jesus and His Spirit, but it is still the Christian who speaks it.

I often think of baptism when I am confronted with this, and it makes this easier for me. We as Lutherans believe that God works in Baptism, he reaches out and touches the sinner, forgiving

their sins, creating faith, establishing relationship. That is why we baptize infants, for the same reason that we hold them, because that touch of water is the way God puts his arms around them and says that he loves them.

But if the parents don't bring the child, if the preacher doesn't speak the word and splash the water, if the altar guild member doesn't fill the font, there is no baptism, and God does not do that good thing that way that day. Who acts in a baptism? Of course God does, but in a strange way, we do too. It would be foolish to say that I am responsible for the change that happens in a baptism, yet, without me or someone like me, it is not going to happen. God has oddly made himself dependent on me.

God loves the "Yes" that sinners say when they first come to believe. He delights in the vows of the psalmist and the prayers of the saints and the songs of Sunday School children, even when they are out of tune. God loves people, you see, and he loves to welcome them into his arms, and all the better when they are there for the first time. Today we delight in the "Yes" that people can say, because God has led and helped them to that point.

Now there is more to this and this is what also makes it uncomfortable for the Lutheran, especially the modern Lutheran who is far too intellectual in his understanding of faith. The new believer is often the most contagious Christian – it is this very exciting moment of conversion which feels so much like a decision, is in fact a decision. I think we need to ask whether we stifle one of our most effective and helpful outreach tools when we tell our folks not to use the decision language. Is there a way to talk in terms of decision and keep the proper understanding that God has made this possible?

Are the unbelievers today so immersed in the self-autonomous psychology of this generation that if we don't use the language of decision we are essentially unable to talk to them? Biblical sermons almost always have this sort of a challenge or invitation within them. Look at Peter's Pentecost sermon, or the other Acts sermons, or even Paul's letters which often were read as sermons, there is often a real appeal made to the individual to engage in what the author said.

Is it essential to realize that conversion is a now and a not yet sort of experience. On one hand on the day of our conversion/baptism we are fully and wholly a child of God. Yet, on the other hand we grow into this. Consider a couple who have been married for many years. Legally marriage is not a spectrum. One is either married or not married. But after many years of marriage, a healthy couple are of course more married after the decades of growing together. We grow into this Christian thing. We might the first time talk about this as a decision and honestly understand that I have done something. It may only come upon later reflection that we see the handiwork of God which led us to that decision and empowered it. But too often we have an eager new Christian who uses decision language and we sternly correct them. But is that good pastoral care? It probably is not the best thing to beat the new believer over the head with this stuff. They need to grow into it. Have we perhaps not adequately realized that this is a process and this is a matter of relational growth? If we rush them into the understanding we are in fact rushing the relationship

inappropriately. Are we like a newlywed couple expecting immediately to be just like their parents who have been married for decades.

Lutherans really don't have an option about talking decision in our sermons. In article II of the FC Epitome the Concordists take up the topic of Free Will. They notice that there are really four operative states for a human being. Before the Fall and after Resurrection we are sinless and exercise free will in relationship to God. After the fall we can either simply be a sinner, or we can be a regenerate sinner. The sinner cannot really exercise free will, but the regenerate sinner, the now/not yet person can and does exercise free will. In negative thesis #8 the Concordists make a really important statement:

But, on the other hand, it is correctly said that in conversion God, through the drawing of the Holy Ghost, makes out of stubborn and unwilling men willing ones, and that after such conversion in the daily exercise of repentance the regenerate will of man is not idle, but also cooperates in all the works of the Holy Ghost, which He performs through us.

Notice that the regenerate will participates in "all the works of the Holy Ghost." If we are not talking decision with our regenerate, post-baptized Christians, we are not Confessional! We just need to be careful that we don't make it sound like we are talking about the conversion of the human being from the post fall to the regenerate state, the sinner to the redeemed, the non-Christian to the Christian.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us to know Your Son, Jesus, to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow His steps in the way that leads to life eternal; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

"Grant us to know Your Son," We use this word "know" in so many strange and interesting ways. It is such a powerful word for us and yet we are so sloppy about it. I can say I know this or that fact and take a test to prove it. I know my friends. Biblically, however, we also hear that Adam "knew" Eve and soon along comes Cain. That is a totally different sort of knowledge. I can "know what you mean."

We wondered if we might want to say that our prayer was actually to know Jesus more intimately or more closely. Of course, we don't want to say that somehow there is a scale of knowledge to which we must attain, but at the same time, we want to know Jesus more intimately. To know Jesus better is a goal of every Christian. It is not that such a better knowledge makes us more beloved or more saved. Perhaps the word we want to focus on is the "steadfastly" in the second line above. Our following is steadfast. Should we be saying "joyous" or "lovingly" or "eagerly." If we want to keep the steadfast language, do we want to say "doggedly" or "enthusiastically." Perhaps the word we want there is "authentic."

Perhaps we want to say that we want to grow deeply in our relationship with Jesus in order to follow him to life eternal.

Yet it is also true that these knowings are all the same in some way and different. I get to know some things by studying them. Yet, do I know a friend better if I measure them carefully and am able to tell you to the ounce how much they weigh? Some of my friends would be rather offended if I asked. They might say, "I don't know them well" if I did ask for that information!

We want God to grant us to know Jesus to be the way, truth, and life. Is that a factotum we are supposed to learn like what year Columbus crossed the sea or who won the 100 meter race in the Olympics? Of course not, but then what is this knowledge?

To know Jesus to be the Way, Truth, and Life is to entrust oneself to this. This knowledge is akin to knowing that this is the woman you want to marry. It is not something that you study more and thus know better. This is not some fact which you store in the mental filing cabinet somewhere for recall. This knowledge is the sort of thing you put into your life and do something. When you know she is the one, you ask the girl to marry you. When you know Jesus is the Way, Truth, and Life, you follow that way, you heed that truth, you live that life.

As the prayer concludes, we know this so that we may follow him. The first Christians were called "followers of the Way." What is the Christian way that we follow? Does it take faith or has it been accommodated to a larger culture so it is not really a challenge for us anymore?

We thought that there were many ways in which we might say we follow in the steps of Christ.

- 1. Jesus lived a radical life – he eschewed the ways of his generation, living as an itinerant preacher, giving up all, speaking a radical message which was not always well received. Do we follow him by living counter-culturally?*
- 2. Jesus went to a cross – perhaps following him means we will suffer, perhaps even as far as martyrdom.*
- 3. Jesus loved people deeply. He could not just walk past the sick and dying and broken people callously. He did something. Do we follow Jesus by living lives of service?*
- 4. Jesus was sinless. This is a tough one – is this what we are praying for?*

More? Do we expand this list?

Readings *All the readings this week are embedded in longer sections of Scripture whose context is often important for understanding and preaching. I have included some of that context for the sake of our discussion. We also have two readings for the Old Testament reading this week. The preacher will have to choose one. There is that choice language again!*

Proverbs 9:1-9

Wisdom has built her house;
she has hewn her seven pillars.

² She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine;

she has also set her table.

³ She has sent out her young women to call
from the highest places in the town,

⁴ “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!”
To him who lacks sense she says,

⁵ “Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.

⁶ Leave your simple ways, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

⁷ Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse,
and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.

⁸ Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;
reprove a wise man, and he will love you.

⁹ Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser;
teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.

¹⁰ *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*

¹¹ *For by me your days will be multiplied,
and years will be added to your life.*

¹² *If you are wise, you are wise for yourself;
if you scoff, you alone will bear it.*

Proverbs is likely an instructional text used in Jerusalem before the Exile and the destruction of the Temple and probably afterwards too. This material seems to come from the time of Solomon and is clearly ascribed to him. This is what a young man would have learned as he was moved from the status of a child in the community to the status of an adult, probably in the time somewhere around the age of 30.

Here, Lady Wisdom sets the feast, the simple, the foolish, are beckoned to come in, eat of her larder, her roasted meats, her mixed wines. This is an invitation. Will we take it? If we take it, do we not first need to admit that we need what she has to offer?

The second paragraph is rough. If you reject the offer, you are a fool, if you accept the offer you are a fool, but at least you are willing to learn. In either event, no one can say that they can get by without her feast. The scoffer and wicked man who is reprovved, or told he needs the feast, will reject the offer. But the wise man will take instruction and be wiser still.

It is not hard to see which one the Proverbialist wants us to be. Which one do you want to be? How do you get an invite to that feast? What if we have an invite already? What does this feast taste like?

If you read on in Proverbs you get the portrayal of Dame Folly, who is likened to a prostitute sitting at the door of her house, beckoning to those who walk by. Those who enter her house soon

discover that it is the gateway to hell. She beckons them to taste stolen water and the bread which is sweeter when eaten in secret. It is a powerful psychological understanding of motive. Why do we do these sinful things? There is a banality, a patent foolishness to sin. Who needs more examples of the horrors of drug addiction to know that it is a pathway that leads to death and misery? And yet, the numbers of people who are sucked into this hollow and hellish life continue to grow.

The Christian who reads this with the John text is prepared to hear Jesus offer up a wisdom which will offend our sensibilities. But it is the fool who turns away from God's wisdom which is wiser than the world or God's strength which is stronger than the world. When Jesus says something that makes your head spin, don't be surprised, after all this is God's wisdom.

or Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, *"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac. ⁴ And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. And I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. ⁵ And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in the midst of it, and afterward I brought you out.*

⁶ *"Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. ⁷ And when they cried to the LORD, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did in Egypt. And you lived in the wilderness a long time. ⁸ Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan. They fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. ⁹ Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel. And he sent and invited Balaam the son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰ but I would not listen to Balaam. Indeed, he blessed you. So I delivered you out of his hand. ¹¹ And you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the leaders of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And I gave them into your hand. ¹² And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³ I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.'*

¹⁴ *"Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers*

served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods, ¹⁷ for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. ¹⁸ And the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

¹⁹ *But Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹ And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the LORD.”*

If we are reading the numbers accurately, and I have no reason to disagree with them, Joshua is likely the only living eye witness to the crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground and the plagues visited upon the Egyptians. It says he died at the age of 110 years old, not quite as old as Moses. The people over 20 all died in the wilderness wanderings. Even the infants who did not die, would by this point be 90 years old.

I really wish they would not cut out the intervening verses; although, I know why they do it. It is just too long, the names are too obscure, and the story seems so triumphalistic. But the fact remains that the choice which Joshua lays before the Israelites that day is predicated upon the gracious care which God has shown to his people in the years leading up to that fateful day, or in other words, the stuff which the editors cut out of the reading. The answer of the Israelites is a brief summary, but it would be better if we could see the connection between the saving acts of God and the decision which the people are asked to make and which they do make.

As I note in the initial essay this is very uncomfortable for Lutherans. We don't like decision talk. It sounds too much like we are doing something and that transgresses our notion of grace alone. But the Bible uses this language, so we must too or we are simply not a sola scriptura church. That doesn't mean that we use it without some discernment and in the context of the whole of scripture and the totality of what we believe about God and his Kingdom. What feels like a decision may not be an absolute decision. What we perceive as a moment of decision may in fact be a moment to which we have been prepared and led by the Spirit of God. Even our decision may be a gift, but it is still our decision, and God loves it and he does not shy away from calling it a decision and I am not sure we should either.

Joshua asks the people to follow God with him. They all resoundingly say “Yes!” but we all know how that turns out: whoring after Baals and other false gods. Demanding the kings that God did not want for them, finally being cast out of the holy and Promised Land and exiled in Babylon, temple destroyed and 10 of the 12 tribes forever lost. No, this history suggests rather strongly that salvation does not lie in the act of our will. That is too tenuous of a place; that sand

shifts too easily. Salvation, real salvation, can only be found in God. For all the good intentions, we simply are not up to the task. I can decide all I want to decide, but in the final analysis, it is God who saves. This is the problem with a decision theology. It locates too much in the person.

*But there is a solid principle of logic which comes into play here: the abuse of something does not preclude the legitimate use of something. You can impress your friends and say it in Latin if you like: *abusus non tolit usum*. It is tempting to look at those who abuse their decisions theology and imagine that makes all the decision language out of bounds.*

The interesting question is why is this text is even included in the book of Joshua. The editor of this history continues in Judges, I and II Samuel and Kings to say that the children of Israel were in fact total failures at the promises we hear. Why tell this story? Is he just explaining why God has a valid complaint when they are hauled into exile by the Babylonians? Or is he saying something about us too? We ask confirmands to confess the faith and promise to hold it even to the point of dying for it. But we also know that in a few years most of them will hardly ever be in church again. Are we any different? Is this describing us as well? What does that mean that this story of us is found in here?

Psalm 34:12-22

⁸ *Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!*

Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

⁹ *Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,*

for those who fear him have no lack!

¹⁰ *The young lions suffer want and hunger;*

but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

¹¹ *Come, O children, listen to me;*

I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

¹² *What man is there who desires life*

and loves many days, that he may see good?

¹³ *Keep your tongue from evil*

and your lips from speaking deceit.

¹⁴ *Turn away from evil and do good;*

seek peace and pursue it.

¹⁵ *The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous*

and his ears toward their cry.

¹⁶ *The face of the LORD is against those who do evil,*

to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

¹⁷ *When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears*

and delivers them out of all their troubles.

¹⁸ *The LORD is near to the brokenhearted*

and saves the crushed in spirit.

- ¹⁹ Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD delivers him out of them all.
- ²⁰ He keeps all his bones;
not one of them is broken.
- ²¹ Affliction will slay the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
- ²² The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

The earlier, omitted verses have a wonderful line which might be of use today: Taste and see that the LORD is good.

The psalmist begins by addressing the reader/hearer with a decision to make. Can we do that? The assumption is that all humans would desire many days and seek life itself. The Hebrews did not seem to suffer from the nihilistic ennui of our age. Life was good, they knew it and this psalm assumes it.

The quest for this life, however, is not some act of the will, but it is predicated upon the gracious acts of God. Lord is looking out for the righteous, and he turns his face from the wicked. Yes the righteous are afflicted but the LORD delivers them. The wicked can be slain, but not the righteous. Is this a trust in the resurrection? I am not seeing how it could be anything else.

Ephesians 5:6-21

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

³ But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. ⁵ For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not become partners with them; ⁸ for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰ and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³ But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, ¹⁴ for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

*“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”*

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Again, notice that Paul is quite good at telling us what not to do, but when it comes to telling us what to do, he gets much less specific. Preachers should remember this. If Paul does not do this, I wonder how much we should.

But Paul does get a little more specific here. The life of foolish and unwise darkness is replaced by a life which does not get drunk on wine but on another Spirit entirely. That holy inebriation is expressed in music. Is Paul referring to something about first century worship, was it a little on the wild side? Was it not always so regimented and contained? Perhaps. We really don't know, but it appears that it was very musical. Paul regularly seems to quote songs in his letters (famously in Romans 1:1-6 and Philippians 2:5-11)

It is the last sentence the preacher might want to focus on here. Mutual submission will be important especially next week when this verse is tragically omitted from the pericope. What would this world look like if we were always trying to put the other first, before our own needs? That means others would be putting us first, it is true, but we would always be putting them first. I suppose it would feel very different, would it not? It might be a little chaotic as we fell over one another trying to help each other. But I cannot but think that it would look more like heaven than this world of competitively devouring one another and winning at another's expense.

Have you ever heard the story of the man who had a vision of heaven and hell? In both visions he saw an identical great feast set before people, but the people oddly had no elbows in their arms. Just long straight arms with hands clutching their forks. In hell they all sought to feed themselves and no one got much of anything, just a lot of food thrown around and people who were very crabby. In heaven, on the other hand, they fed each other, and the feasting was marvelous, and the fellowship sweet.

Submit to one another, urges Paul, define yourself as a servant of the other. This will be the key to his joy in Philippians and it is the key to his vision for the Church in Ephesians. Sing a song with someone else in the lead; it really is a good thing.

John 6:51-59

⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ 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.”

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “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. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

⁶⁰ *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”* ⁶¹ *But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe.”* (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) ⁶⁵ *And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”*

Jesus cannot just leave things well enough alone in this text. The Jews are offended by what they hear, so Jesus ratchets up the offensiveness of what he says. In verse 54 where the language changes to “feed on my body” the Greek is even more graphic. The word is chew! Jesus makes them think about moving their jaws up and down and grinding his gristle between their molars. No wonder some of them left at that point. Would you have stayed? Is this why our own translations clean this up, lest someone hear and think we are cannibals of some sort? But this raises another question for us. Just what are we concerned about here? Is our Bible too edgy?

John is taking the incarnation to a new level here, to a level where it becomes offensive. There are those offended by the incarnation. The most obvious example is the Moslem who thinks that we dishonor Allah, or at least engage in idolatry, when we would say that Jesus is God. Surely God, or Allah in Arabic, would not be found in the flesh of humanity with its appetites, its failings, its weaknesses and sicknesses. The Christian has to face the fact that this position is quite logical and sensible. The modernist is also offended by the incarnation. If he believes in God at all, he admits him distantly interested in the world, but Jesus claims to be more than human, not a distant God but right here. The pantheist (think Hinduism/Buddhism) is also offended by this. For them God is in everyone. Jesus does not claim to have God in himself, but to be God himself. His flesh is the salvation of the whole world. Peter’s flesh is not, nor is John’s, nor is yours, but Jesus’ flesh is.

John will not let you have the ethereal and spiritual Jesus nor will he let you have that merely human Jesus. He will force us to stumble upon the scandal of particularity. This first century

peasant, this carpenter's son from Nazareth really is God in the flesh. That flesh, because it is Jesus' flesh is the salvation of the world. Jesus walks on water, calms the waves, and feeds the multitudes better than Moses. This is God. But John won't let you have him as some quasi human either. Jesus weeps at Lazarus' grave, he hungers, he thirsts, he grows weary, and he dies an excruciating death on a cross, pouring out blood and water from the lance's puncture to his side. When you get done with this thing, Jesus is both God and Man, or John is a liar.

Today he speaks of how necessary that reality is. He is the only hope for life, and that hope resides in the fact that his flesh is God too. In the incarnation, God has taken up the totality of human nature to himself. We must share in that humanity, we must share in that fleshliness. If Jesus does not have flesh, we don't have the bread of life. If we would deny the humanity of Jesus, we would deny salvation itself.

But of course, we don't deny the fleshliness of Jesus. We confess the humanity of Christ every week in our creed which we drone out just like we did the week before. "Born of a virgin, who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven and was found a man..." But do we really have that internalized? Is it really part of our personal and communal understanding of Jesus? I have more than once been confronted by a parishioner who said that Jesus did not really undergo a temptation in the wilderness. That was easy for him. He did not really suffer when he was on the cross, he knew he would rise in three days so it was different for him. He did not.... The implications of this are enormous. If we don't eat the flesh, chew the gristle, if Jesus doesn't have it, we don't have salvation itself. Whoever does chew this meat and drink this blood abides in Jesus and he abides in them and they have a perfect fellowship with God, the very definition of life.

This message is a scandal, and if no one is scandalized by our preaching, I wonder if we have not actually preached it. It is interesting to note that the grumbling here is not among the Jews but among the disciples. That distinction in John is very clear and has to be intentional here. The preaching of the incarnation even causes waves among those who are in the inside of the movement. John records that many walked away from Jesus that day, but Peter for once got this one right. Jesus has the words of eternal life, where else can they go? We don't get this as our reading today because the editors elected to save it for the Markan account which we get in chapter 8, just before the transfiguration story. But that is still several weeks away and I cannot imagine that anyone would mind if the preacher elected to extend the reading this far.

How will we preach the scandalous incarnation today? Shall we declare ourselves to be Jesus? That is not a road I would recommend and it smacks too much of pantheism. What is more, too many false prophets have made that claim and led thousands to destruction. That scandal is not the scandal we are looking for. The scandalous incarnation seems to be that Jesus has united even with us, even with you, even with them. The scandal needs to be a scandal we feel as well, not just something that we create in others. Jesus is in the flesh. He is not a tame lion, remember, he does not do in that flesh what we would like him to do, the sorts of things that self-respecting messiah's always do, at least as we imagine them to always do. Jesus in the flesh shocks us. In

the coming weeks we will hear Jesus urge us to take up a cross and follow him. Jesus in the flesh goes to Calvary, to brutal death, and to sacrificial suffering. Jesus says that since we really take this flesh of his, this reality, this incarnation, into ourselves through faith we abide in him, and he in us. Christians need to be aware that they have not been united to a Jesus who is a “winner” in every sense of the word. Indeed, he sure feels like a loser on that cross. Therein lies the real scandal of the incarnation.

This might be best preached as the scandal of particularity. Jesus makes a pretty interesting, bold, and awesome claim. Eat his flesh, have life. Don’t eat his flesh, no life. There is not an option B here.

So what is the scandal here? For the unbeliever it is the scandal of particularity. Jesus is claiming that he is the secret to life. But he is a Palestinian peasant, crucified by the Romans, who lived thousands of years ago. The unbeliever can hardly buy that.

But the scandal is not only for the unbeliever. The believer is also scandalized by this but for a different reason. John is insisting that the salvation of the world comes through the humanity of Christ. We want to keep our God holy, high, and awesome. But John is insisting that we accept the meatiness of Jesus. He was really and truly human. If he was not, says John, this whole schema collapses. We are not saved. The life of the world, our life, depends on this enfleshment of Christ, this human nature becoming his nature. We have to swallow this.

But swallowing this is not something we are incapable of in Christ. His outpoured Spirit opens our hearts and lives to Him. The one who swallows this, the one who confesses this, the one who “faiths” this has Christ abiding in him.

Law

1. God does not fit my expectations, he shocks me. Today he completely messes things up by entering the flesh of a sinful humanity, sullyng himself with the very things I want to be rid of, death, hunger, frailty, and weakness.
2. Scandalized by God, I want to make him fit inside my boxes, my ears close when he speaks the uncomfortable word, I withdraw, I will have my God a respectable God who is worthy of my praise.
3. I claim that I am a Christian, but how can I be sure. What if the feeling I have, the decision I have reached is little more than a foolish thought? What if what I feel is nothing more than a delusion and I am just fooling myself? What if I am just a sham?
4. Do I really have anything to which I can point to and then say, “See, there is God in my life.”? My history, unlike the people the Israel in Joshua’s day seems particularly bereft of pillars of fire and cloud. No manna graces my lawn first thing in the morning, no water from a rock.
5. Jesus really is the bread of life which has come down from heaven. I cannot claim to be that bread and I cannot bake it on my own. He is the wisdom which transcends my feeble

and miserable life, and my old sinner loathes that. I want to keep something for myself, some shred of integrity and self-sufficiency but he denies it to me. I am simply an empty place which he must fill.

Gospel

1. God does not fit my expectations, he exceeds them. Rather than simply blotting out a problem like sin, he has united himself to sinful flesh and in so doing imported his holiness to this broken world.
2. God smiles at my shock and indignation, and then he goads it a little more. Not that I may be indignant at him, but that I may finally realize its foolishness and be united to him in holy joy. He knows this is hard for me, that is why he gives Spirit and Word and he works mightily to overcome stubborn hearts.
3. I am a fool and a sham, and God knows it and that is why he has sent Word and Spirit into this world to come to me. He delights in my feeble “yes’s” that I offer him, but he does not count on them. Rather he has established my righteousness in the Cross on which Jesus died and connected me to that cross by the sure and certain work of his Spirit in water applied, word proclaimed, and supper eaten.
4. Jesus is the rock which followed them in the wilderness (I Cor 10) He has graced my life with the simple and beautiful places in which I have been fed and sustained by the relationships, events, and people who have brought me his love and tender care. I too have been that for others. The absence of miracle is not the absence of God, but another way for his presence to be felt. To say “yes” to God is not to say that he will now show up dramatically. To say yes to God is to acknowledge his presence every day in my life.
5. Jesus really is the bread of the world. My old sinner does want to have his way, but his way leads to death and darkness. God has a much better thing to say and do. Praise him for it.

Sermon Ideas

1. Shocking Jesus – (That the hearer would not be comfortable with the incarnation but rather be comforted by the Word of God in the flesh of humanity.)

Jesus today drives people away, he says he does not do that, but the fact is that his words were too much for some of those who were gathered around him. In the verses immediately after these it says that some who were numbered among the followers of Jesus, disciples left him. Not the twelve, John is careful to say, but some others who had been considered disciples. Jesus words are radical and offensive and if we have never really struggled with that offence, we might not have really listened to what he said. Jesus says that God, our God, the creator and sustainer of the universe, the Holy One of Israel

who parted the Red Sea and raised up David to be king, that God, humbled himself fully to be a human being.

Perhaps we have heard that so many times we are no longer shocked by it, and that might be good but it might also mean that we are not paying attention. God doesn't put much stock, you see, in his own reputation or what you think of him. He loves people, all of them, even the nasty ones. And that means he is willing to let a humble girl named Mary nurse him, change his diapers, and hold him on her lap. That is how much he loves people, yes, even you. He does this because in a garden long ago this human race said we wanted to do it our way and to be in control. But our way ends in death, and our control has only ruined God's beautiful creation. So God came to be subject to every curse we brought down on ourselves, bore the sins of the whole world in this flesh and thereby made all flesh a holy thing, yes, even the flesh of the really nasty people.

This is the scandal, Jesus did not become savior of just the nice people, the folks I like, but by taking on humanity, he became the savior for all of creation, including the whole of humanity. There is no one we can look at out there, not the worst guy sitting in a prison cell, not some evil despot in a distant land, no one, whom Jesus has not united himself with. That list includes every druggie sitting glassy-eyed under some bridge, every flamboyant homosexual, and every foul mouthed gangster who frightens us on the street. Closer to home, it could be the guy down the street who is obnoxious and annoying. He loves them all, he united himself to them all, and if you cannot buy that, you must fundamentally deny the incarnation, the bread of life. Are you ready to see them as a part of you? Jesus does.

Praise him for it, because you and I are much more like them than we are natively like him. He has crossed the gulf to embrace the whole of humanity and taken the time learn each of our names, he loves you that much.

2. Dining with Lady Wisdom (OT and Gospel lesson – that the hearer would heed the call of God to flee this wicked generation and pursue the righteousness of God.)

Peter urged the hearers of his day to flee their crooked/perverse generation (Acts 2:40). Those words have gotten much more germane where we live. The state in which I am raising my children has declared that marijuana is legal and acceptable. A pot shop has opened up down the street from my house. Its clientele have hardly been the sort of influence I seek for my son and daughter. The Supreme Court has ended the gay marriage debate by saying it is legal everywhere. But that is not new. Over 40 years ago they legalized abortion and the people of the US have busily conducted our own holocaust of infants which far surpasses the grisly toll of 20th century dictators. The promise of the internet which was supposed to freely share information and connect people but the truth is that its largest component is pornography. This list could go on. It might in your sermon, but don't take it too far, we have to save some room for the rest of this story.

The proverbialist today urges us to dine on the feast of wisdom, to walk in the ways of righteousness. In a wicked and perverse generation, that gets harder and yet somehow more discernable. Yes, our culture has approved of many morally wicked things. But that doesn't mean we have to do them. We can separate ourselves from this wicked generation that way. We can feast on the table spread by wisdom.

But Jesus today also speaks of a feast, a feast laid out by divine and not human wisdom. But this is not a moralizing feast, a feast which is measured by the goodness of our deeds, but a feast for sinners. Jesus is the entre! He offers his meat for the salvation of the world. Our escape from the wicked generation and their grisly end is not found in our moral rectitude, but in his generous and gristle-filled gift of himself.

The moralizing heart which lives in all of us imagines that separation from the world means we disconnect from all the garbage and putrid sin of the world. But look at Jesus, our leader, host, and feast itself. He does not disengage but engages all the more. True holiness is not found in our efforts but his. Yes, this means we do not need to live as the world has deemed acceptable. We can love our spouse, honor our parents, work honestly, and live decent lives. We don't need to be like that and thus we separate ourselves from it.

But we are truly separated from the world by the fact of the one whom we consume in faith, Jesus. He has set us apart, but not that we be apart but that we be a part of his mission to redeem and save this benighted world. Separated from the world, we are sent back into it to be the light and salt which it so desperately needs. The foolish man who stumbles out of the pot shop down the street from my house does not need my condemnation. His life is already a train wreck and he probably can tell that better than you can. He needs Jesus.

The fleshly Christ who will not let us spiritualize him in the Gospel reading today will not let us spiritualize our place in the kingdom either. He still is in the flesh, in the meat of humanity. He is in our meat and means to feed the world.

3. Make that Decision – God loves it, in fact he loves it so much he made it possible. (That the hearer would rejoice in the gift of a decision and own that decision as a gift from God.)

Readings today seem to speak a language alien to us, the language of decision. Both Proverbs and Joshua speak of decisions, so matter which one you use, you are stuck with it. Paul urges a decision to leave the dark ways of the gentiles and to walk in the light of God. Jesus in the Gospels lays a stark choice before us, either stay or go. Lutherans can often be heard railing against decision theology, but here is decision talk in our Bible. What will we do with that? I suppose we could just ignore those things and pretend they did not get said, but we are a Scripture Alone sort of church. Do we really have that option?

The truth is that for many people conversion does feel like a decision; let's rejoice in that with God. The parables suggest that in heaven the angels of God are rejoicing when sinners repent, even if they don't get that just right. It is true, the talk of decision may put too much emphasis on me as the decision maker and too little on God who has reached out to me in love. But there is time to fix that. In the moment when the decision is made, and it is made, we join with God in rejoicing.

Remember the notes we put in the first section. The new Christian, who is thinking in terms of a decision, is often the most contagious Christian. We don't exactly have an altar call in the same vein as Billy Graham, but we do have one called Communion, people come forward and make their confessing in kneeling, bowing, presenting themselves to that bread of life simply to be fed by him.

The proverbs text really has a choice for us. Wisdom gives us an invitation to a feast and invitations always have those silly letters RSVP which ask for a decision. Will you come? The last part with its comparison of the stubborn and the wise recipient of the invite can give a great opportunity to teach.

Consider the Joshua text – did you see that large chunk that was taken out. It was taken out because it was filled with a retelling of the exodus event, lots of names, kings conquered, stuff like that. The decision the people at Joshua's time made was a decision based on God's repeated and gracious actions on their behalf. Yet it felt like a decision, it was a decision. But they could never have made that if God had not been working in their lives for the past decades as they wandered the deserts of Sinai and conquered the nations of Canaan. They had seen the walls of Jericho tumble down. That was the God they were "deciding" for. Thus it is with us. God has not waited for our decisions and we do not need to put too much stock in them. They are, after all, simply the ephemera of the human mind. God has worked in much more substantial things. He has not waited for our decision, he has entered humanity in the person of Jesus, the bread of life, the source of life. He has poured out His Spirit on all humanity, so that options which were simply impossible for us without that Spirit become the well lit doorways of faith and trust and love of God through we can enter with peace and joy. Even the will to make that "Yes, God" really belongs to his creative work. The Israelites would actually not be very good at keeping their promises made here, and you and I are not really all that different. But God is very different. He has declared his love for you in Christ, you are redeemed, forgiven, and beloved by him.

4. The Easiest Decision You'll Never Make (That the hearer pause and ponder the amazing work of God in his/her past and affirm once more the good vow he/she made in the Rite of Confirmation.)

There is a funny thing about saying the creed, we say it every week, but have you noticed that God is really the subject of all the verbs there. I just believe this. God actually does

all the work. He creates, he saves, he sanctifies. The creed asks absolutely nothing of us. We are along for the ride on this one.

This sermon asks the reader to remember something which they have already known, likely for a very long time. But it is easy for us to forget it, to lose the wonder at this. It is easy for us to get caught up in the busy-ness of our lives and forget that in all this, in the relationships, in the homes, in the jobs, in the family, God is really at work, sustaining, helping and guiding us.

This day will give us a chance to notice and see these things – and with the folks of Israel long ago, to say this is our God.

The preacher may well want to focus his sermon on the recitation of the creed at the end of the sermon. Just what are we doing there? We say it so often, we might not do it consciously, but we are really doing what Joshua's folks did. We are remembering the good works of God in our lives and saying "Yes." It is a total no brainer – who would not have gone with the God who parted the Red Sea and gave them manna? Who would not go with the God who has been a part of our lives? The easiest decision we never have to make. God has already made it for us.

5. Walking as the Children of the Light (Epistle: that the Spirit of God would fill the hearer with joy in the life to which He has called them.)

This sermon wants the hearer to imagine that there is another way to live. The world is constantly evaluating us. It is judging us, comparing us, and evaluating what we say and do. We as human beings are often in the space where we think that this is the only way. But God is not there. Paul does not tell us to aspire to the light, he tells us we are already there. We are already in the light.

We are living filled with the Spirit, poured out on us in Baptism and throughout our lives. That makes our lives of service, love, and worship into something different. They are no longer lived with this eye toward reward or praise or fear of punishment and consequence. We live in a joyful truth, a truth which Paul calls the light.

The preacher will need a story, a story in which someone does what they do for the simple joy of it. You cannot simply explain this, you need to give it flesh and blood, you need to give it a story. That is the only way to get them to imagine this other way of life.

You could tell a story of your life, a story of another life. It doesn't have to be something profound. We are talking about someone who loves to dance and dances with fervor and joy. They may not be all that good, but they love it. This the guy who loves to build stuff, the woman who loves to do something for the sheer joy of it.

In a sense, this is a vocational sermon. We are talking about a life which is lived after the forgiveness and redemption and restoration which is Jesus. If we are not earning

something, do just roll over and play dead? Hardly. We now get to live a life differently and beautifully.

The person who hears and believes this sermon will see the good that God is calling for in this sermon not as a burden laid upon them but as a description of something that God has created in them, a good thing which God has made and which is bearing fruit and flower already in their lives and which God is causing to grow. Tie it into the rest of the readings. Having feasted on the bread of life, what will do now?