



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092  
(262)241-3121 [www.stjohnsmequon.org](http://www.stjohnsmequon.org)  
Email: [office@stjohnsmequon.org](mailto:office@stjohnsmequon.org)  
**Pastor James Tiefel**  
**(262) 853-9723 (cell#)**  
Email: [pastortiefel@gmail.com](mailto:pastortiefel@gmail.com)

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## August 22, 2021 in the Season after Pentecost

### Cling to the Bread of Life

Can it be true that Jesus is the only way to God, that faith in Jesus is the exclusive path that leads to forgiveness and heaven? Those who participate in world religions would surely disagree, as would even some who hold membership in Christians churches. This is clearly the message that Jesus proclaimed as he identified himself as the bread of life in John chapter 6: “Whoever feeds on this bread,” Jesus said, “will live forever.”

**First Reading**                      **Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18**  
*Joshua vowed to serve the Lord.*

**Second Reading**                **Hebrews 11:24-28**  
*Moses remained faithful to the Lord despite the pleasures of Egypt.*

**Gospel**                                **John 6:51-69**  
*Jesus' disciples confess their allegiance to him.*

**Sermon**                               **John 6:51-69**

The bread and fish miracle and especially the bread of life discussion was kind of a turning point, kind of a critical moment. The religious authorities were skeptical of Jesus from the start, but the common people followed Jesus like a superstar. They liked what he said and they loved what he did. The bread of life changed that. Some of them said—and we heard this in today’s Gospel—**This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?** John tells us **From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.**

What happened? Probably a bunch of things. What Jesus said was hard to understand. Moving from the staff of life to the Bread of life was a challenge. Then there were the claims that Jesus made: better than Moses, sent by God. That was an assault on the heart of their religion. Not freeing them from the Romans struck at the heart of their politics. But what bothered them the most was Jesus’ insistence that he was the only way to God. Their status as the sons of Abraham, their obedience to the laws of Moses, their inheritance of the kingdom of David—none of that counted, according to Jesus; it got them nowhere with God. It was the exclusivity that got them. There is only one way to life with God. **I am the Bread of life**, Jesus said.

Let’s bring this to 2021. The Pew Research Center informs us that the number of American adults who consider themselves Christians has shrunk 17% in the past ten years. The number who mark “no church affiliation” is up 10%--that’s 30 million people. The future doesn’t look good. Less than 49% of young adults, ages 25 to 40, classify themselves as Christians. Only a third of those Christians attend worship and 65% never go to church. But I don’t have to tell you this. You know these people. We live in an age when **many of Jesus disciples have turned back and no longer follow him.**

What happened? Probably a lot of things. Here’s the bottom line. More and more, people in America are not convinced that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. They want the good life—that’s 100%. They believe in an afterlife—that’s 80%. But they reject the exclusivity. It seems so un-American, so undemocratic, even racist—that it’s Jesus or nobody.

This is the world we live in and this affects us in all sorts of ways. It affects the way we think and the way we act. So it's important that we go back to John chapter 6 one more time and hear what Jesus has to say about this. And this is what he says:

### **Only One Way**

Only one way to life with God

Only one way to faith in Christ

1. This is what got the Jews upset: **How can this man give us his flesh to eat?** And then Jesus gave them more to chew on: **Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.** If you just pick up your Bible and read these words, you have to assume Jesus is talking about Holy Communion: flesh or body and blood. But Jesus isn't talking about the sacrament he instituted for his followers; he's talking about the sacrifice he offered for the world.

We know this story so well. Sin ended the relationship God created with his human creatures. Before sin Adam and Eve were together with God, tight with him every day in every way. That's the way God set things up. After sin, Adam and Eve were separated from God. God set that up, too. Being together with God is what the Bible calls life. Being separated from God is what the Bible calls death. That kind of death is what **came to all people because all sinned.**

So what does God do at that point? Does he change the way he set things up? No. God doesn't say one thing and do something else. What God did was develop a way to get rid of death and restore life. He sent his divine Son in human form and gave him a human name. Jesus had real flesh on his real bones with real blood running through real veins. The God from God and Light from Light became truly human so he could take care of what God had set up. And so he took our place. He substituted himself for us. He supplied the obedience God demanded of us and he endured the punishment God decreed for us. And so he got rid of death and brought back life with God.

When you decide to try a new weight loss plan, the eating and drinking come later. You have to buy in to the plan first. That's the point Jesus was making here: Whoever buys into what I did with my flesh and blood, whoever invests in the sacrifice I made, whoever believes that I lived and died to forgive their sins, that person **has eternal life and I will raise them up at the last day. That person remains in me and I in them. That person lives forever.** That is very good news, the best news you and I could ever hear. But there's one more point: **Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.** You get this, right? **Jesus is the way to life with God and Jesus is the only way to life with God.**

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand what's driving a lot of Americans away from Christianity and from church. It's the exclusivity of the Christian religion, the insistence that Jesus Christ is the only way to life with God. There are 1.8 billion Muslims in the world, 1 billion Hindus, 535 million Buddhists, 15 million Mormons, and 14.7 million Jews. Keep counting. There are millions who call themselves Christians who don't go to church (think of all the Christians in Europe today), who adopt lifestyles that reject God's will, or who suppose that doing their best will get them to heaven. From what we can tell, all these people reject the idea that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. Nobody likes to say this out loud, but unless those people find Christ, they will all go to hell. Jesus is the way to life with God and Jesus is the **only** way to life with God. And I didn't say that. Jesus said it. **On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"** Disciples then and disciples now.

2. **Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you?** It certainly did and Jesus knew why. They had followed Jesus, they had watched Jesus in action, they had listened to Jesus, but they refused Jesus. They heard his voice but they didn't hear what he said. Jesus explained why, **The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing.** The human mind can cure cancer, split an atom, and send a camera to Mars, but it cannot penetrate the mysteries of God's plan to give life to the world. Human intelligence, for all of its magnificence, it still human, still flesh, and it cannot get a handle on the miracle of Christ.

The truth is that it takes a miracle to believe a miracle. And Jesus performs that miracle through his Word. He said, **The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life.** Sometimes we get into our minds that the Bible is nothing more than a Bible story book. It supplies the information about God. But the Bible is more than information. The words of Jesus are spiritual words that create the miracle of faith. St. Paul wrote, **I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.** When we were in catechism class we memorized Luther's words, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord nor come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." The hymn writer wrote that Jesus burned his way into our hearts "unasked, unforced, unearned." You and I cannot choose to believe, we are not forced to believe, we cannot work to believe. Faith is a gift. Jesus said it: **no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them. There is only one way to faith in Christ, and that is by the Spirit working through the gospel.** You heard it: **Only one way.**

So they were gone, at least most of them. **They turned back and no longer followed him.** Jesus looked at the Twelve and asked, **You do not want to leave, too, do you?** Peter's answer laid it out clear and simple: **Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.**

This is the bottom line of our lives as Christians. **Jesus is the only way to life with God.** We believe that, thank God. Every day we enjoy the blessings of that life: forgiveness, confidence, peace, hope. Some day we'll enjoy the blessings of God forever. But we must grapple with the truth that Jesus is the only way to life with God for everyone—and that includes our kids and our parents and our friends just as much as it includes billions of people around the world. Without Jesus there is no forgiveness or confidence or peace or hope and there is no heaven. Only faith in Christ gains those gifts as it buys into and grabs onto the cross of Jesus. Faith is more than recollections from Sunday School or being raised in a Christian home or being buried in a Lutheran cemetery. Faith is a miracle that God works in us through the gospel. The gospel comes to us in preaching and Bible study, it comes as we remember our baptisms, it comes as we receive the Sacrament. Without the gospel there is no faith, without faith there is no Christ, and without Christ there is no life with God. **There is only one way to life with God and that is Jesus. There is only one way to faith in Christ, and that is the gospel in the Word and sacraments. Only one way.** Jesus' words in John insist that we wrestle with these realities.

Dear Jesus, lead us to grapple and wrestle and believe. Help us to say each day, **Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.** Amen.