



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Scripture Texts for the Day: Sunday, August 15, 2021

Proverbs 9:1-6

⁹Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.

²She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.

³She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town,

⁴“You that are simple, turn in here!”

To those without sense she says,

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

⁶Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

Ephesians 5:15-20

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

John 6:51-58

⁵¹I 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.” ⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³So Jesus said to them, “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. ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This 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.”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Dee Pederson, Bishop-Elect

August 15, 2021

All 3 of today's readings talk about what it means to *really LIVE*. So how would you respond if someone asked, "What does it really mean to LIVE – to live your life wisely, and FULLY?"

- So I Googled "Live life to the fullest."
- You know what it's LIKE when you Google a topic like that?! You get tons of sites with millions of hits. For example:
- 101 Ways to Live Your life to the Fullest. 30 Ways... 21 Ways.... 45 Ways to Live Life to the Fullest, such as:
 - Create a bucket list and start checking things off.
 - Set goals and write them down.
 - Don't live for others.
 - Live for others.
 - Maintain an internal locus of control.
 - Don't be jealous.
 - It's O.K. to fail.
 - Overcome fear of failure by visualizing the worst case scenario.
 - Don't gossip.
 - Ignore the things you can't (or won't) change.
 - Change things.
 - Take care of your body. Take care of your mind.
 - Plan for the future, but live in the present.
- You find images of plaques with quotes, like:
 - Keep calm and live your life to the fullest.
 - You only live once, so live life to the fullest!
 - Life is too deep for words. So instead of describing it...let's just live it.
 - Live life to the fullest and don't regret it; don't look back & just be free.

You know what it's like to read that stuff..... and it just kind of exhausts you!

What does it mean to live life to the fullest? With millions of Web hits, clearly the question of living life to the fullest is of interest and concern to people today, who are searching for answers wherever they can be found.

No matter how many times you Google it, the best guidance you will ever find to the question is heard in some of the most well-known verses from the Gospel of John.

- John 3:16 – most well-known Bible verse.
- John 6:51 – "I am the living bread that came down from heaven."
- John 10:10 – "I have come that they have life and have it abundantly."

All 3 of today's readings provide a fuller picture of what abundant life, living life to the fullest, looks like.

- In Proverbs, the best way to live life is with WISDOM, not FOOLISHNESS.
 - Wise living is portrayed as a woman who builds her house, establishes values, prepares her meal, and makes every effort to invite go out and invite people in.

- In Paul's letter to the Ephesians,
 - It is the wise who see that in Jesus Christ, a NEW DAY has come, and that begins in the way we live and make the most of *NOW*.
 - To live wisely, according to Paul, is to believe that God's will is to bring all things together in Christ, that our purpose in life and the things we DO serve to build up Christ's body right now, and to never forget to give thanks to God for others and in all circumstances.
- Finally, in John 6, Jesus is totally talking about what real life is all about.

So to re-cap John 6:

- This chapter began w/ Jesus feeding the 5,000 w/ 5 loaves & 2 fish.
- Jesus took their hunger seriously. He knew hungry people can't hear Good News until their stomachs are fed.
- But then Jesus said that he came to bring food that would *fill MORE THAN* their stomachs. He said, "*I've come to give you so much more than anything you could ever imagine: a living relationship w/God - that begins right HERE – right NOW!*"

Because "*I'M the BREAD that came down from HEAVEN!*"

That's the point at which the people who were listening to Jesus began to get a little bit riled up. THEY saw him only as son of ordinary Mary & Joseph; couldn't understand how he could make claims about coming down from heaven.

It's not surprising - because so many understandings of FAITH assume and behave as though your relationship w/ a god is based on something *YOU do*:

- The proper kind of worship or prayers;
- Making the right kind of SACRIFICES;
- Living out certain BEHAVIORS intended to move you closer to God.

Jesus is saying, "NO!" our relationship w/ God isn't with some far-away and aloof deity; it's a relationship. And that relationship is based on what GOD has done, loving the world, and sending the Son *for the WORLD*. John makes this clear right from the start of his story: "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.*"

So people got upset when Jesus talked about his relationship with the Father; this was not only unheard of, it was heresy!!!

But it got worse! Jesus went on to talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. *Unless you eat my flesh & drink my blood, you have no life in you.*" And when he started to say THOSE things, it wasn't simply a polite theological discussion. Where it says, "*They disputed among themselves,*" it really means, serious and bitter conflict with each other.

Why?! Back in John's time, "*eating someone's flesh*" – literally *munching* or *gnawing on* his flesh - was a pretty horrific thing to say.

- The devil was referred to as "*eater of flesh.*"
- "*Drinking blood*" was forbidden in the Law.

We've heard those words of Jesus about eating his flesh so many times we don't think twice about it. But take off your "church hat."

- Imagine that you grew up in another faith, or
- Imagine you're hearing those words for the first time.
- They're appalling and got Christians in trouble during many points in our history!

These words are SO familiar, SO taken for granted, that we can't hear how controversial they were when Jesus spoke them.

Eventually, the followers would understand what those words mean after –

- they went to that Last Supper with Jesus,
- saw him take the bread & cup and speak those words about his body and blood,
- and the next day, give his flesh to be broken & his blood poured out on the cross.
- *Bread that is LIFE for the world.*

But in that moment in time, these words of Jesus made no sense!

Yet this what makes the gift of Holy Communion so beautiful for Christians today! Because - think about those words, and what this promise means in terms of living life to the fullest:

The next time you & I receive the Bread of Life, we know we will come, first of all with open hands.

- "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."
- We bring none of our presumption, merit, worthiness. Nothing, save our failures and sin and brokenness.
- Our hands say, "*God, I can't do what you need me to do. So I need YOU to give me strength. I need YOU to fill me up. I need you to forgive me.*"
- And each day wherever these empty hands take us, we discover again how dependent we are on God's amazing grace.

It means that we aren't alone. We are with others. Being part of Christ's church and of a congregation isn't a solitary existence. When Christ brings us into his body, he brings with him all the other millions of rag-tag followers who ever lived and who live now in this town and around the world. We don't get to choose who's in the body of Christ. God does! We're not alone!!

The thing that Jesus promised comes true: when we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are receiving his body and blood.

- How can that be?!?! Martin Luther described it as Jesus being, "*in, with, and under*" the bread and wine, as he promised when he said, "*This IS my Body. This IS my Blood.*" Not a symbol, not "this sort of represents me," but this IS: Body. Blood.
- That means that Jesus is becoming part of us. His Body and Blood abide IN us – NOT just in our head or our heart – but Jesus becomes part of every cell of our body, along with everything he brings:
 - ABUNDANT life, eternal life:
 - Being raised with Christ who was crucified, dead, buried, raised, & reigns forever.
 - Who, one day, will draw all people to a feast in God's reign, where hunger and death will be no more.

You see, all of those platitudes will fail us, because it is only in JESUS that we know what it means to “live life to the fullest”: NONE of those cute sayings speak of the fact that God loves you so much – that Christ would undergo the foolishness of the cross – all for your sake & sake of the whole world.

And NONE of them speak to anything beyond what we see right now. In all of them, the speaker sees nothing but the present, suggesting that if we don’t “use the present”, if we don’t follow steps 1, 2, 3.... That’s it! Time’s run out. *Game over*. The “live fully” quotes fail to recognize with Paul, that “*If it is for this life only that we have hoped, we are of all people, most to be pitied.*”

Because we believe that in Baptism, the future is secure; God’s will is clear. God intends to gather up all things in Christ Jesus, so God’s reign comes in all its fullness.

That means that you & I can throw ourselves 100% into living boldly in present, as Luther said: “*Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain, that you could stake your life on it a thousand times.*”

And so Jesus goes with you out into the world because you’ve got Good News to share and work to do! You leave worship so you can BE his Body in the world, living as JESUS did: forgiving your enemies, denying yourselves, loving your neighbors, taking up your cross, following, and living as one body in the world.

- Like the reading from Proverbs says: The foolish person sits at the doorway and waits for someone to pass by and come in. The WISE PERSON prepares the house, and then goes out into the highways and byways & inviting everyone to come in.
- As Teresa of Avila wrote back in the 16th century:
*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which to look out w/ Christ's compassion on world
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless people now.*

For all who want to experience life, lived to its fullest: Jesus is the Bread that is life for the world.

THIS is wise living. Living life to the fullest. Having LIFE and having it abundantly.
Amen. May it be so.