

Eat and Rejoice

John 6:51-58

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

Baroness Karen Von-Blixen, a wonderful Dutch author, wrote a story once about an entire meal. The plot of the story centers on two older single sisters named Martina and Philippa, named after Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, the great reformers. Their father, the village pastor had died years before, but they had dutifully kept to his pieties traditions, making sure their small village of aging people kept to the faith, no laughter, no dancing, no frivolous signs of joy at all. Instead this tiny village along the Nordic coast, was barren, a dark, quiet place where the two dozen or so people found their only joy in the promise of God's paradise to come. Into their midst comes Babbette, a war refugee from France. Seeking shelter and help, the sisters take her in as their servant, despite the theirs and the villagers apprehension towards any outsiders. But life went on. They drudged through their work and they dutifully prayed in somber worship, sang their traditional two hymns that spoke only of rejoicing when the new Jerusalem comes and in general lived their lives.

That is until one day Babbette got word that she had won the national lottery of a long ago forgotten ticket that she still possessed. With the idea of celebrating in a town that never celebrates, Babbette asks the sisters if she could honor their dead father, the former pastor of the village, on what would have been his one hundredth birthday, by serving "a real French feast." Her only demand on the sisters is that the whole village has to come to the feast. The sisters offer their consent to honor their father with a feast, and Babbette goes off to get ready.

Soon, Babbettes feast is coming together, fine wines, china, silverware, truffles and quails, meats and cheeses are all being delivered, and even an enormous live turtle was shipped in. All the while she is shopping, cooking, and baking, the villagers along with the sisters are in private turmoil over this feast. Some are even having nightmares that Babbette's feast is turning into a satanic celebration of sin and gluttony. Guilt and worry becomes so much that the villagers hold a secret meeting to decide what to do about her dinner. They decide it is wrong to cancel it since she has gone to so much trouble, so they decide and make an oath that they will all attend but not enjoy themselves. "It will be as if we weren't even eating and drinking" they said to each other, instead they would concentrate on the words of their departed pastor to keep the heart and mind pure and not on the pleasures of this world.

Well the day for Babbette's feast finally comes, and the townspeople grimly gather. Without even a smile they all set around a beautifully set table of fine china, candles, aromas and crystal.

And as if by magic course upon course of gourmet quality dishes come before them, each better than the previous, each with the perfect wine to match that dish. It was a true seven course five star French dinner, equal to the finest restaurant in Paris itself.

As the food and drinks come and go the villagers quote their favorite sayings of their departed pastor and struggle not to think about what they are eating and how delicious it all is. But by the end of the feast even with the old pietists trying to be all stoic, you can see they are enjoying themselves, teasing each other, pretending not to notice that each of them have broken their oaths and are now enjoying the meal more than they had promised to do. By the end eating the chocolates and sipping on cognacs after the dinner, the villagers leave the meal a little happier, a little freer, and a little warmer toward each other and toward Babbette, who by the way turns out to be the former head chef of the greatest restaurant in Paris before the war.

As if this meal had been her last that she would cook for them, Phillippa and Martina thank Babbette, expecting her to leave town with her winnings and start a new life. But Babbette wasn't leaving, she still wanted to be their servant girl, and live in this dark stoic village. It turns out her five star dinner feast, prepared for all the people of the village who distrusted her and even thought she may be of the devil, cost her the entire prize money. She had spent all her winnings, everything she had, on this one meal of joy and celebration.

Jesus said, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." What a costly feast it is that Jesus puts on for us every week! Like Babbette's feast, it's a feast where Jesus gives everything that he had, his life, his flesh and his blood and yet people are distrustful, somber, not appreciative, and reluctant to participate. What Jesus says in this reading pushes us much further than anything he has said up to this point in John chapter 6. Until now, Jesus has been speaking safely. Tantalizing, even teasing us, drawing and leading us along as servants of his church as stewards of his blessings. He fed the five thousand, and the people want more. He tells them that he is the bread of life, and they are confused. He says that he was sent from heaven and the people, the living bread and they begin to complain, who does he think he is.

But Jesus continues on. He doesn't worry if the people will be offended, he doesn't bend his words, instead he pushes ahead. This bread of life, this living bread that came down from heaven, which a person may eat and live forever, is no ordinary bread. It isn't manna in the wilderness or five barley loaves by the seashore. This living bread is Jesus' own flesh, his humanity, his own body and life that is nailed to the cross for the life of the world. Now the complaining Jews are disputing among themselves. Now it has escalated to a full blown argument. The people are shocked. "Has he lost his mind? What on earth was he speaking about? Surely

Jesus was speaking spiritually or figuratively or even parabolically.” How can he give us his flesh to eat? Who is going to eat the body and the blood of Jesus?

And as they are disputing this, Jesus says, “Very Truly. Whenever the sentence starts by saying Very Truly we know it must be important. Very Truly – perk up your ears, listen up, and hear this... It means Jesus is getting down to business. He doesn’t want us to miss it. “In all truth I am telling you unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Now its serious, Jesus went from spiritual feeding to the very act of digesting the very gift of God in a very physical sense. Jesus is using such a verb to eat, that quite literally means to consume, to chew, to munch. This kind of talk, to eat the flesh and blood of a person, would easily get your committed, if not crucified.

Jesus brings us to the ultimate faith point. A crisis point. Will we trust him? Will we trust someone who pushes things this far? Will we trust Jesus who tells his disciples to do the unthinkable, what is even forbidden in the Old Testament, to drink blood and eat flesh believing that by it they are eating and drinking the eternal life, the gift of forgiveness of sins, the very presence of God? Unbelief tells us to say No, it can not be, he can not do this, he is just human, it is just bread and wine, we could never eat, chew, munch on someone that is human. But faith says, “This is the gift of life, the gift of God, that fills us and cleanses us, redeems us and grants us grace. This is the body and blood of the same Lord who offers up his own body and blood on the cross so that we might have life.

We are drawn away from this sea shore scene where Jesus has been talking to the crowds to for most of this chapter right to that last night before he died, before he offered up his body to be broken and his blood to be poured. Our hearts and minds turn to the Jesus who at the table took the bread of the Passover, and held it up and blessed it and broke it and said those amazing words, “Take and eat, this is my body, given for you.” We remember how after supper at the last cup of Passover, he held up the cup and said the cup blessing, giving thanks and giving to all to drink saying “Take and drink, this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” And so we take and eat and we take and we drink because Christ commanded us to do this.

When we take and eat this bread and drink this wine it is not a simple time of remembrance. It is not a simple ceremony of something people did long ago. It is the actual body of Christ, the meal that Jesus has offered to all the world, to eat and live. To take his body and his blood that is present in, under and with the bread and wine and be connected through him to the Father now and forever. It is a meal that continues until we join with all the saints in the heavenly

kingdom. It is a gift that we shouldn't take lightly or dismiss, because this is the great feast of God, the gift of life, the bread of life that grants us life everlasting.

At times we can so easily be like the guests at Babbette's feast. We come because we feel we're obligated. We come up somber and reflective, forgetting the great gift this meal is all about. We come up taking to receive our part forgetting to open our hearts, minds and hands to receiving the gift of Christ. This is the foretaste of the feast to come, this the blessing of God's real presence with us, in and us and through us. It is a call for all children of God, from the youngest to the oldest to come and receive the blessing of the sacrament of Holy Communion. I am glad to see that some children are coming up with their families now to receive the blessing during communion, this Fall, I am going to ask the nursery to bring all the children up during communion, so that all the members of family of God can gather together in this Holy meal. To celebrate, with joy and thanksgiving the great gift that God has given to us in the body of his only Son.

Like Babbette and her seven course dinner, Jesus invites us and gives us a meal that we could have never dreamed of. It is a feast like the world has never known. Where normal we would be thrilled to even have a crump from God's hand, or a sip of wine from God's cup, God instead offers up his only begotten son, bodily offering his life so that we may be filled and drink and live. Come and eat. Come and Drink this is the living bread, all those who eat of this meal will live forever. Rejoice and give thanks that you were invited to the Lord's feast. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. AMEN.

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and for all people according to their needs.

Almighty Lord, you loved the world so much that you sent to us your Son, who came not to condemn the world but to save it. He offered up his own body and blood so that we might find life in him. We give thanks for this great gift this day and come to give you our praises. Empower us to always be filled with your Word and your flesh made real. And guide us in all our ways.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer..

O Heavenly Father, we ask that you come upon this place with your heavenly spirit. Enter here and rest upon us your servants to lift up your word, to sing your praise and welcome all into your fellowship. Transform us and empower us to be your servants in this time and place and send us out as your witnesses to all the world, sent with a mission of spreading your love and grace to our community and beyond.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer.

God, stretch out your saving hand to those who are sick. With your strong love, comfort the lonely, the oppressed, and all who suffer. Give courage to those facing surgery. Give healing to those who are afflicted, those that are mourning, that are suffering from abuse or hatred, from disease or disasters. Give peace to those troubled both physically and mentally. Impart your Holy Comforter to be with them in their times of need. Especially we remember today our hospitalized, our homebound and all those we name now in our prayers to you.... Jarrett Peck, The Family of Sylvia Dillow the Crawfords and Glasses, the Family of Rae Koontz, Ryan Bevins, Sandra Fridinger, Kathy Fridinger, Rodney Marchio, Gladys Garrett, Tony Hagerman, Ann Bevins and all those we lift up to you now....

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for your creation. The world exists in the fallenness of sin and have turned from you, and we face hardships and destruction, war and violence. Continue to inspire all people to turn back to you and to return to your ways. Lift up all those who need comfort this day Lord, comfort from sickness, disease, and famine, those facing hardships of disasters or floods. Be with those fighting for justice and for peace in all the world against oppression, hatred and greed. Grant your Spirit of Peace and Hope to all people of this world so that we may see in you the glory of your creation.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Into your hands, O Lord we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.