Sermon copyright 2009 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Pentecost 16B
Peace, Seattle
August 23, 2009 epk
John 6:56-59

CHOOSING LIFE

Today, as we focus on the fifth and final installment of the Bread of Life discourse from John's gospel, we can see clearly how the scandal, the controversy, and the audacity of Jesus' claim "I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE" is finally taking a toll.

Last week Jesus said: 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 ABIDE IN ME, AND I IN THEM.

Today, we learn that for a number of his followers, this teaching proved to be too much.
The more Jesus had spoke on the subject, the more bizarre it had sounded.
Eating flesh and drinking blood was the last straw.
This is a *SKLEROS LOGOS*—a hard teaching—we hear them say. It's the same word that forms the basis of the term ARTERIOSCLEROSIS—hardening and narrowing of the arteries.

For a good number of those who had been following Jesus, the words about eating flesh and drinking blood was a shocking surprise. They wanted no part of it. In fact, John tells us, because of this teaching, many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer went about with him; no longer accompanied him.

"The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life," Jesus had told them.
But for them Jesus' words smelled like death. Jesus turns to the Twelve, who remain, and asks:
ARE YOU GOING TO LEAVE ME, TOO?

And Peter, speaking for them, says:
LORD, TO WHOM CAN WE GO? YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE.

Being a Christian, being a follower of Christ, a disciple of Christ, one who is apprenticed to Christ, means recognizing where life can be found and where it cannot be found. In the face of difficult words and difficult teachings, we must make choices.

This morning as we gather here in West Seattle, sisters and brothers from throughout the ELCA are gathering for closing worship at the Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis.

It has been a week of passionate conversation and action on a variety of issues—some of which, like the statement on human sexuality, have seen our church divided; and some of which, such as full communion with the United Methodist Church, have united us and opened the door to new mission partnerships.[1]

On Wednesday the Social Statement on Human Sexuality was adopted by the assembly, culminating a formal Churchwide process that began in 2001. No one could have predicted what the outcome of that vote would be. A 2/3rds super majority was required for passage and the actual vote tally was precisely on that line--**66.67% yes and 33.33% no**.

[1] Links to the Churchwide assembly, including proposed resolutions and actions, can be found at: http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly.aspx

Sermon copyright 2009 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Just one additional nay vote out of over 1000 votes would have changed the outcome.

Then on Friday the assembly acted to allow congregations and synods that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

Further, on a vote of 55% to 45%, the assembly committed the ELCA to finding a way for people in such relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.

For some congregations these actions are indeed a *SKLEROS LOGOS*, and they will consider leaving the ELCA because of them.

Other congregations and individuals, including many of us here at Peace, will hear in the assembly's actions a deep affirmation for their ministry, and relief that the possibility now exists for full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life and mission of the church.

The document itself recognizes that there is no consensus among Lutheran Christians on these issues and that we can come to differing conclusions about the implications of God's word for human sexuality; it supports the need to honor the **bound consciences** of its members, wherever they might stand.

As I prepared my sermon this week, I simultaneously watched the live, streaming video conversation at the assembly on the web, where I saw long lines of people, each one a committed Lutheran Christian, waiting for the opportunity to have their voices heard.

As I shared with the leaders of our congregation earlier this week, I was struck by the sincere, clear, committed, articulate, and powerful testimonies of people standing at both the red microphones (opposing adoption) and green microphones (supporting adoption.)

As that assembly gathers for worship this morning they will hear the same words of Scripture proclaimed to them as we have heard.

Some will share the peace of Christ with their neighbors through tears of sorrow,
others, through tears of joy.

But when it's time to eat, all of them, like you and I, will come to the Table looking, begging, for the BREAD OF LIFE.

The good news of what God has done for us and the world in Jesus *dwarfs* any differences between us as human beings. It was this realization that captured Paul's heart and mind, compelling him to write:

THERE IS NO LONGER JEW OR GREEK, THERE IS NO LONGER SLAVE OR FREE,
THERE IS NO LONGER MALE AND FEMALE, FOR ALL OF YOU ARE ONE IN CHRIST JESUS.

And in a crucial scene in the book of Acts, Peter had his own faith-altering experience when, after being led to the home of a gentile named Cornelius he discovered, much to his surprise, that the Spirit had already preceded him there!

I GET IT! Peter says, I UNDERSTAND THAT GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY, BUT IN EVERY NATION ANYONE WHO FEARS HIM AND DOES WHAT IS RIGHT IS ACCEPTABLE TO HIM. [Acts 10:34-25]

Sermon copyright 2009 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

The Holy Spirit compelled him to act against centuries of precedence forbidding Jews to associate with Gentiles, and he responded by baptizing Cornelius' entire household on the spot.

The issues we engage as a church and as a congregation may lead us to disagree with one another about how God is asking us to act in the world. Complex conversations may confuse or frustrate us. Changes of all kinds may confound us.

But sisters and brothers **we are ever clear** about the One who washed and claimed us in baptism; **we are ever clear** about the One who calls us beloved daughters and sons and forms us into a new family united through the death and resurrection of Christ. **We are ever clear** about the Living Word who calls us again and again into a relationship of love with God and with our neighbor.

Yes, there are many differences between us within the ELCA, and, within this congregation—and I for one thank GOD for that because if I only hear in my neighbor's words echoes of my own, then neither one of us is apt to do much growing.

But the good news of what God has done for us and the world in Jesus dwarfs any differences between us as human beings. We are ever called to treat one another, in the words of D. Bonhoeffer, as sisters and brothers "for whom Christ also died."

As our presiding bishop Mark Hanson said this week, "We meet one another finally, not in our agreements or our disagreements, but at the foot of the cross — where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ."

When we come to the Lord's table, we relinquish ourselves wholly, giving ourselves over to God's care, trusting that the Lord will forgive and feed us, and fill us with all that we need to face the realities and limitations and struggles of our lives and to support and welcome all the others who have been invited to God's Table.

I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE, says Jesus. COME TO MY BANQUET, MY FEAST OF LOVE.
PUT YOUR TRUST IN ME, AND BE FILLED. BECOME MY BODY FOR THE WORLD.

LORD, TO WHOM CAN WE GO? YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE! ALLELUIA!
Amen.

Sermon copyright 2009 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Prayer of Bishop Hanson after second resolution passed (Ministry guidelines) on 8/21/09

OH HOLY AND LIVING GOD, YOU HAVE BEEN HEARING THE PRAYERS OF YOUR PEOPLE, PRAYERS OF GRATITUDE AND LAMENT, PRAYERS OF BEWILDERMENT AND RELIEF.

AND IT IS PRECISELY AT MOMENTS WHEN THE PRAYERS ARE SO VARIED THAT WE ARE MINDFUL THAT THEY ARE ALL OFFERED TO ONE GOD, WHOM WE KNOW IN JESUS CHRIST, AND THAT THEY ARE OFFERED IN THE CONFIDENT PROMISE THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT INTERCEDES FOR US AND THAT THE SPIRIT, THROUGH THE GOSPEL AND THE MEANS OF GRACE CONTINUES TO WEAVE US TOGETHER.

WHEN THAT FABRIC FEELS FRAGILE AND WHEN IT FEELS REWOVEN, I INVOKE YOUR PRESENCE, NOT ONLY FOR US IN THIS ROOM BUT FOR ALL THAT ARE BEING MINDFUL AND PRAYERFUL AS WE WORK.
CONTINUE NOW TO BE WITH US AS MORE WORK AND MORE CONVERSATIONS AND MORE DECISIONS LIE BEFORE US. IN THE NAME OF JESUS WE PRAY, AMEN.

ELCA Assembly Hears Presiding Bishop Hanson Call for Continued Unity 09-CWA-37-CA

MINNEAPOLIS (ELCA) – The presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) urged all in the church to continue discussing their differences, and meet "not in our agreements or our disagreements, but at the foot of the cross — where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ." The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop, spoke shortly after the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly approved controversial changes in the church's policies that would allow people who are in committed same-gender relationships to be on the church's official rosters. Previously, church policies required clergy and professional church workers who are gay or lesbian to refrain from homosexual sexual relationships. The churchwide assembly, the chief legislative authority of the ELCA, is meeting here Aug. 17-23 at the Minneapolis Convention Center. About 2,000 people are participating, including 1,045 ELCA voting members. The theme for the biennial assembly is "God's work. Our hands."

The presiding bishop, who spent 23 years as a parish pastor, said his work Aug. 21 was like the work of a pastor called to a family that had "experienced loss, or perhaps were wondering if they still belonged or in fact felt deeply that ones to whom they belong had been severed from them." To that family, the presiding bishop said, he would explain that Scripture assures Christians that nothing "in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of Christ." Or, Hanson said, his work today is like "going into a family or a group, a community that had always wondered if they belonged and suddenly had now received a clear affirmation that they belonged?" That family needs to hear the Bible verse that says "you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall."

The ELCA contains both those families, Hanson said. And, he added, "what if those two groups were together, but also in their midst were those who had not experienced loss or the feeling of the dividing wall of separation coming down, but were wondering and worried if all that had occurred might sever the unity that is ours in Christ and might wonder if their actions might have contributed to reconciliation or separation?"

Then the bishop said, he would ask all to follow the Bible's (Colossians 3) mandate to "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another

Sermon copyright 2009 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." The bishop's words were aimed at those with varying opinions in the controversial sexuality discussions which occupied the assembly this week. Those who are disappointed with the decisions still have "in this church the expectation and the freedom to continue to admonish and to teach." Those who, because of their concerns for people who are gay and lesbian may have "experienced reconciliation today," are "called to humility. You are called to clothe yourselves with love." The bishop's words echoed the spirit of resolutions passed here calling upon all with disagreements to "bear one another's burdens" and remain united in the faith. Hanson said, "we're all called to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, remembering again and again that we are called into the one body."