

**Sermon: “The \_\_\_\_ Came Down From Heaven”**

Text: John 6:56-69

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*Background: Originally preached on Sunday, August 22, 2021, in the morning worship services at First Lutheran Church and School, Torrance, CA, an English-speaking multiracial community with a majority of Caucasians. (edited and added footnotes for better reading experience)*



Figure: The picture that was shown on the projector screen for the congregation to see during the entire sermon.

Why is this picture on the screen? I am not telling you why I put it there right now, you need to be patient. Don't worry, it will come, I promise.

After the commemoration of Mary, this week we come back to Jesus as the bread of life this week.<sup>1</sup> Next week, we will move on to the Gospel of Mark.<sup>2</sup> So, according to our lectionary, this Sunday is the final week for us to meditate on John 6. What is the concluding message for this bread of life series?

Today's reading starts with verse 56, Jesus says "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," (v.56) Let us go back to the previous text to see what Jesus says before this verse. "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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." (V.53b-55) We need to remember that Jesus said this in a Synagogue. These words are hard to take in, especially it's against Torah to consume blood.<sup>3</sup> No wonder Jesus' disciples say, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

<sup>1</sup> According to the Revised Common Lectionary, there were 5 weeks from July 25, 2021 to August 22, 2021 that cover John 6:1-69, the "bread of life" series. However, the week before this sermon was August 15, when Catholics, Lutherans, and some other denominations celebrate Mary, Mother of Our Lord, and for ecumenical participation, this church used Luke 1:46-55 for the sermon on August 15, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Revised Common Lectionary, Year B.

<sup>3</sup> The prohibition on the consumption of blood can be found in multiple places in the Old Testament, for example, Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:10-14; Leviticus 19:26, etc.

In fact, John's Gospel does not record Jesus' last supper with the disciples as we can find in the synoptic gospels, so this paragraph, including verses 57 and 58, is John's Eucharist text. The flesh and blood Jesus is talking about here would be the bread and the wine in the last supper.

What if I tell you, Jesus is not the bread of life? Some of you may say, "Ah-ha! I knew you were up to something, the picture on the screen starts to make sense now." Some may think, "vicar, you got to be kidding me, you cannot change the Bible. That is heresy! That is blasphemy!"

- The original word of "bread" here in Greek is: ἄρτος (*ártos*), which means "loaf of bread" or simply "bread."
- In some Korean translations of the Bible, especially the classic ones, the word ἄρτος was translated into 떡 (*tteok*), which means rice cake. We can see an example of rice cakes on the left side of the screen, but there are more different types of rice cakes.
- For Japan, the country that integrated western cultures and took in foreign languages earlier than many Asian countries, the most circulating translations use パン (*pan*) for bread in John 6, if you know Spanish, you know "pan" means bread. However, you can still find some Japanese Bible translations use めし (*meshi*; **Kanji 飯**), which means "cooked rice."
- And for the Chinese translations, they used this word 糧 (*liáng*) that usually represents all kinds of grains, but it mostly refers to rice, for this word itself has a root of the word rice (米 *mǐ*, **the left part of 糧**). In addition, Chinese people often use the word 糧 (*liáng*) or the phrase 糧食 (*liáng shí*) to represent any kinds of food.

What if someone says, "I don't care how you translate the Bible, I want my bread!" Oh, let me tell you this, it matters. First of all, the missionaries and early East Asian Christians decided to use these translations for "bread," there must be a good reason. In those old times, the loaf of bread did not exist in their daily life, it was western food. The Chinese phrase for common bread 麵包 (*miànbāo*) was not invented until the 19th century, and it is never used for Bible translation.

Second, the staple food in those people's lives was never bread. Many of them didn't even know or had never seen the bread in their whole life. It's easier for Christians in those regions during that time to believe Jesus is the rice of life, because they did not know what is bread, or anything that could be considered as bread<sup>4</sup> was not as essential as rice in their life. Translating Jesus as "rice of life" makes more sense to them and makes Jesus more important in their perception.

Third, it matters that Jesus could be the rice of life. That's how we evangelize in different cultures. That's how the Word in the Bible can really touch people's hearts. It was the work of the missionaries that contextualized the biblical text to help people understand the significant meaning behind it.

Furthermore, Jesus was for everybody, Jesus died not only for people who eat bread, but also died for people who did not know bread or could not eat bread, Jesus' body is given for everyone regardless the race, class, age, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, ability, and people who eat gluten-free. Jesus loves everybody, and Jesus loves diversity and inclusivity. How great is the love of Jesus? How can we say it is not alright?

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<sup>4</sup> Chinese use another word 餅 (*bǐng*) that could be unleavened bread, cookie, cracker, or pie. The word 餅 (*bǐng*) was used to translate the word "bread" in the Lord's last supper.

Some people may have seen it in the worship bulletin, the hymn of the day is “The Rice of Life.”<sup>5</sup> Don’t look at it now, we will sing it after the sermon, now please continue to listen to me. This hymn is from the new hymnal published by our denomination ELCA called *All creation sings*, and the text in this hymn was written by a Methodist pastor from the U.S. who served in Malaysia for decades. His work is a good example of Jesus’ love, and the love of a pastor and a missionary to the people he serves. It will be an unfamiliar melody and music scale because it is from a Taiwanese Indigenous folk tune.<sup>6</sup>

The footnote in the hymnal reads, “In many Asian cultures rice, not bread, is the staple food. This hymn expands our metaphors for holy communion, contextualizing the scriptural image of Jesus as the Bread of Life (John 6).” Jesus as Bread of Life is not just literally bread. It is Jesus’ body, whether it’s a wafer, or rice cake, or tortilla, or King’s Hawaiian<sup>7</sup> sweet round bread – my home church uses that for the Communion.

It was the Word that matters that gives meaning and life, as Jesus says in verse 63, let’s hear this in another translation “Every word I’ve spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is life-making.” (The Message Bible) Do we follow Jesus and love others? We have been singing what Peter says in verses 68-69 in our Gospel Acclamation.<sup>8</sup> The disciples followed Jesus because Jesus has the Words of Eternal Life. Not because Jesus is the bread and Jesus feeds people. In Matthew 4:4, when Jesus tempted by the devil, Jesus answered by referring to Deuteronomy 8:3, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

In today’s gospel reading, many people left Jesus and stopped following him, maybe it’s because their faith was not true faith, because they followed Jesus for their stomach, for food, for they witnessed Jesus feeding the five thousand.<sup>9</sup> They followed Jesus, because of the miracle, or even worse, some people followed him for free food. When they heard the hard teaching of Jesus, perhaps they thought Jesus was crazy, talking about eating the flesh and drinking the blood, against the Jewish law, the words Jesus said were hard to swallow, they could not accept it, so they just went away. The rest of the disciples, on the other hand, know that Jesus provides not only food but the life and spirit, so there is no other way but to follow Jesus. Remember, the apostles witness Jesus walking on the sea<sup>10</sup> and other miracles, and they truly believe that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

Let me ask you: do you have a strong faith in Jesus and will continue to follow him no matter what, even when people around you fail you, or they turn away from Jesus? Can you continue this journey to follow Jesus even when the teaching is hard? Even though as we read the whole bible, we know that later they will still have doubts, they will still leave or deny Jesus after Jesus was betrayed, but at least at this point, we know when other people turn away from Jesus, they still follow him wholeheartedly, so after the Resurrection, Jesus came back for them help them to regain their faith and even stronger.

Do we also have the same faith that the disciples have in today’s gospel reading that made

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<sup>5</sup> “Rice of Life” (No.965) in *All Creation Sings – Evangelical Lutheran Worship Supplement*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> The tune “Bí-Níu” is a Bunun Peoples’ traditional tune “Motomase” – a song of rice beating.

<sup>7</sup> The first King’s Hawaiian Bakery in mainland United States is in Torrance, California, where this congregation locates.

<sup>8</sup> “Gospel Acclamation (S142a) – Holy Communion, Setting Three” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 142.

<sup>9</sup> John 6:1-15.

<sup>10</sup> John 6:16-21.

them continue to follow Jesus when others don't? And are we willing to take the way that the other people wouldn't take? I hope we do, I wish we can follow Jesus to love others, to serve the world, to make the world a better place.

Let us pray: Dear God, May we have the faith in you when others walk away from you, help us to stay with you, and bring others back to you. And everyone who comes to you, you will not turn them away, because the bread of life, or the rice of life, or the corn of life is for all of us. May we who have different perspectives and gifts work together to make all people know Christ's love, to touch the lives of others, so every folk and nation may feel your warm embrace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Appendix: About the Hymn of the Day, "The Rice of Life"**

You will notice the tempo of this hymn is isometric. The rhythm is related to rice. The rhythm of the farmers hoeing the land for planting rice. The rhythm of the farmers planting the rice. The rhythm of the workers pestling or beating the rice.

#### **"The Rice of Life" – No.965 in *All Creation Sings***

The rice of life from heaven came to bring true life from God above.  
Receive this gift; God's mercy claim, in joy and pain give thanks for love.

True rice the hungry world has fed, the rice required for life below  
Provide this gift, God's mercy spread; in weakness God's compassion show.

The rice of God for all is meant; no one who comes is turned away.  
Believe in Christ whom God has sent; in humble trust God's will obey.

The living rice, for all a sign, came down eternal life to give.  
Abide in Christ, the living vine; in Christ, with people, die and live.

TEXT: J. Andrew Fowler, b.1935. ©1983; 1990 Christian Conference of Asia (admin. GIA Publications, Inc.)

MUSIC: I-to Loh, b.1936. ©1984; 1990 GIA Publications, Inc. (TUNE: bí-niû)