How do you react when someone starts to tell you a story and you realize you've heard it before? Do you ride it out or do you find a way to politely cut the person off so you can get on to other things? In our house, more often than not Billy is the gracious, wait-it-out one while I am the less patient, “I've already heard this one” person. I'm more a product of our 24 hour news cycle culture, where one can get the latest news with the touch of the remote or a glance at a smart phone. I and many like me are not as interested in old news as we are in the latest, most breaking information. When something newsworthy happens, we're the ones switching channels and scrolling through websites, trying to find the most recent unfolding knowledge possible.

This “tell me something I don't know” attitude has certainly come into play for me in this month or so that our gospel lessons have come from the sixth chapter of John. This is the fourth Sunday that John has Jesus talking about bread. The first reference came in the feeding of the 5000 where a meager amount of bread and fish was stretched to feed a multitude. These last three Sundays, it's been all about Jesus making the same declaration over and over again. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus told the crowd two Sundays ago. Last Sunday we heard Jesus say, “I am the bread of life.” And today, we hear it again. “I am the bread of life. “Enough already!” I thought at the beginning of this week as I was preparing for my sermon. How much can a preacher say about the exact same thing three Sundays in a row?

As I read the lesson a few more times and checked out what smarter people than I had to say about it, I realized that today's declaration from Jesus is different from the other two. In the middle of today's discourse, Jesus switches from one Greek word for “eat” to another word. In verse 53, when Jesus says, “...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you,” he is using an ordinary verb for the word “eat.” Then in verse 54, when Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me,” he is using an entirely different word for “eat.” Why is this important” you may ask. This second verb that Jesus uses is raw and graphic. It's the verb used to express animals' eating or for people eating raw vegetables. It's the word that would be used to describe a person eating with his or her mouth open, making a smacking sound. It's the verb that means to chew loudly or gnaw or munch. Jesus was talking about chewing, munching and gnawing on his flesh. If the crowd had gotten tired of his “I am the bread of life” declarations and was only half-listening, this would have gotten their attention. All these people knew about Jesus is that he had given them some bread and fish to eat. They had no knowledge of Jesus' sacrifice of himself that would become sacrament for his people. This idea of eating the flesh of the man before them was outrageous, cannibalistic, even repulsive.

We, of course, hear Jesus' words in the context of Holy Communion, the table where we receive Jesus' body and blood. Jesus' surprising message to us is that the bread we eat and the wine we drink are not just a nice memorial of what Jesus did for us on the cross. When Jesus tells us to gnaw and chew and munch on him, he is pointing to the very real sacrifice he made for us, the giving up of his flesh and blood to give us life. We don't merely remember this when we eat the bread, we absorb the body of Christ into our own body. Martin Luther was adamant about this very real presence of Christ in the sacrament when he wrote the words, “This is my body, this is my blood,” and underlined the word “is.” Luther did not claim to know how Jesus was present in the bread and wine, but he would not budge in the belief that Jesus is really and truly present in the meal.

In our house, though sometimes I get impatient hearing stories I have heard before, I never get tired of hearing “I love you.” Jesus' words to the crowd and to us are his emphatic “I love you” to the world. His way of loving us is undeniably shocking. Jesus willingly dies for us, gives us his flesh to eat and blood to drink. If we can get past the jarring impact of his words and actions, we see resurrection, promise and life.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them,” Jesus says. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. No amount of willfulness, apathy, disobedience or weakness on our part can keep Christ from entering our bodies and changing us.

This intimate eating draws us into faith and into union with Jesus. Again, we hear from Martin Luther, who put it so poetically: “It matters not if you are still somewhat weak, for I am in you. If you lack anything, I have an abundance of righteousness, holiness, and wisdom; I have no weaknesses. But if you are weak, your weakness is in Me, and I will see to it that I help you, that I drown your weakness in My strength and power, that I delete your sin in My righteousness, that I devour your death in my life.” Our weakness is drowned in Jesus' strength. Our sin is wiped out in his righteousness. Our death is devoured in his life. The meal given for our sake and for the sake of the world gives us new life every day. Really new life, as in every way in which you messed up yesterday is wiped clean and forgotten. Every day we face the world clothed in Jesus' strength and filled with his righteousness. We live in the promise of eternal life that began for each one of us at our birth.

What kind of difference can remembering that make in our daily interactions with others? The bread of Christ matters to us because it shapes the way we walk and the way we live. With Jesus as our true bread, his real presence in our lives courses through our veins, our muscles our minds and our wills. It affects how we interact with our families, how we treat the people we work with and live near. Our true bread helps us decide what is worth fighting for in this community and in the world. It tells us how to spend our money and our time. Our true bread gives us wisdom born of God, Wisdom that calls us, the simple and the unremarkable, to eat of the bread and drink of the wine Wisdom has prepared for us.

The meal we share is not a mere remembrance. This sanctuary is a banquet hall where we welcome all who enter to be part of God's lavish feast. The gifts of bread and wine are the very presence of Jesus, who bears the love of God and strengthens us to leave this banquet hall to walk in God's ways. This meal is far beyond what we could ever imagine. It is bread for the world, food for the journey, refreshment for the soul, the abiding of Christ in us and us in him. It is God's “I love you” to a world that must never grow tired of hearing it.

Amen.

*Pentecost 12B*

*August 16, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 6: 51-58*