

Sermon on John 6:51-58 by Pastor Matthew Anker

1. In 2014 while I was on Long Service Leave, my family and I spent a month in Africa, visiting with missionary friends, travelling together and teaching. One of the more interesting parts of that time was the drive we had from Nairobi to Mombasa which is a journey of little less than 500km that took two days to travel. In addition to dodging giraffes on the highway, we also had to regularly take evasive action to avoid overloaded buses as they rounded blind corners on the wrong side of the road; trucks that would slow to 10km per hour on the hills, only to come barrelling down on you at break neck speed at the next descent. There were cars rolled over on the side of the road with people literally dying in them. And then when we finally got to Mombasa, a road closure sent us through a slum which the Australian government has on the 'no travel' list because the terrorist group Al Shabab actively target westerners there.
2. Our daughters were in their mid teens at the time. Reflecting on the road trip one night they said that realising how fragile this life is and recognising that when you wake in the morning you can never be sure you will be alive that night, made them appreciate God's promise of life through faith in Jesus even more than ever. By God's grace the experience did not leave them fearful of death, but instead helped them grasp the promises that Jesus makes explicit in our text today. *Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.*
3. Of course we don't have to travel to dangerous parts of the world to realise the fragility of life, but in the relative comfort and safety of a country like Australia, we have been somewhat inoculated against the ever present threat of death. If you ever doubted that, then our behaviour as a society over the past 18 months must surely have confirmed it for you as we have gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid the possibility of death by covid.
4. It seems to me that we are being governed by fear of death.
5. On the one hand, we have a death rate due to Covid that is the second lowest (after NZ) in the world. Our status as an island and our wealth have helped us 'lock down' and, by comparison with the rest of the world, 'lock-out' the virus. This is to the relief of many folks who feel their vulnerability and fragility in the face of this disease, especially the elderly and those with other health issues.
6. However, in our willingness to do almost anything to avoid high death rates, we have also witnessed small businesses being decimated, children being deprived of social interaction. We have seen people's livelihood taken from them and mental illness rates sky rocket. In other words there are a host of other costs that we've paid to avoid the possibility of death from this virus. These could well include death due to suicide and other factors.
7. Don't get me wrong – we do well to take a cautious approach to unknown health issues, and with a brother in India who's life has been devastated by covid, I know the first hand realities of this in a deeply personal way. I also know of folks almost driven to despair by the lockdowns.
8. I'm not advocating for any particular approach, we need to pray for our political and health administrators. But to be consumed with trying to avoid death, and the fear of death, at all costs, strikes me as a rather fool hardy and doomed approach. Of course I expect this of the unbelieving world, but I wonder if we in the church might have also bought into this fear as well?
9. With devastating images flooding our TVs in the early days of the pandemic, and the incessant media conferences and messages tailored to inspire fear and compliance, it's only natural that as we honour those placed in authority over us we too have become fearful of the virus and the death it might cause. I wonder what this has meant for you and where you place your trust for this life and the next? Have your well intentioned actions and caution led you to make an idol of this life – seeking to avoid death at any cost? Have you found yourself fearing infection and death more than you fear the author of life and death Himself? Have you found yourself trusting in masks, hand sanitiser and government decrees to

sustain you, rather than the promise of Jesus that He is the bread of life and that anyone who eats this bread, will live forever? Or have you become consumed in the counter narrative and become suspicious, fearful and despairing of all that is around us, instead of facing tomorrow with confidence in God's promise to work all things for good for those who love Him?

10. Again, I'm not advocating that we stop those practices. But I'm asking, as God in His word asks us time and time again: Where is our ultimate faith? What is it that we ultimately fear?
11. Respect for this life and concern for the health of your neighbour is a godly thing. But the unintended consequence of fear and misplaced trust is spiritually dangerous and leads to despair. So if you have found yourself unduly fearful of death in these days; if you have found yourself trusting in all sorts of things other than God; if you have made an idol of surviving this pandemic, then today, *know this*: the Lord himself offers you release and freedom and joy!!!
12. Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, they will live forever." The flesh and blood of Jesus – the One who became human for us – has been sacrificed for you. His flesh, hung on a cross to die; His blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins, atones for all misplaced trust. It frees you from fear and anxiety. And gives you the sure and certain hope of something much better than a covid free life in this world. It guarantees you life with Him forever and the joy and peace that offers here and now. So in the name of the One who became flesh and blood for you, Jesus Christ our Lord, you are forgiven and free from all these things and more! And by faith in these promises, God now dwells in you so that you may face the uncertainty of this life with confidence in His mercy.
13. We are not that much different to the Jews who gathered around Jesus in our text. They are the same people who have pursued Him since He fed the 5,000 at the beginning of John 6. He has pointed out that they seek Him not because they believe He is the Messiah who offers eternal life, but because they think He can sustain them in this life and provide for their earthly future. As is so often the case, Jesus' words reveal the short sightedness of this hope and encourages them [and us] to have faith that God wants so much more for them than they dare to dream.
14. Jesus' call to eat His flesh and drink His blood can be understood in two complementary ways which we do well to hold together. Of course us Lutherans can hardly hear these words and not immediately think of the Lord's Supper where the true body and blood of Jesus is given for us to eat and drink that we might have forgiveness, life and salvation. And with the powerful reminder in verse 56 that Jesus abides in all who eat His flesh and drink His blood, what a joy it is to receive the sacrament with these promises ringing in our ears. But it must be said that in the context of John 6, it is also clear that this eating and drinking refers to faith in the flesh and blood man, Jesus Christ, and all that He has done for us.
15. In fact Luther proclaimed with many of the church fathers that 'wherever the message is proclaimed that Christ gave His body into death and shed His blood for our sins, and wherever this is taken to heart, believed, and retained, there Christ's body is eaten, and His blood is drunk. This is the true meaning of eating and drinking. To eat,' he says, 'is synonymous here with to believe.¹ And he goes on to say, 'This text clearly proves that you have eternal life in the very hour in which you begin to believe. It is yours already, and you need not earn it. Nor is there any other means of escape from death, sin, and devil, or of becoming pious and alive.'
16. Just as the flesh and blood of the sacrifices of the Old Testament atoned for the sins of the people and covered their shame so that God Himself could dwell in their midst, the once and for all, flesh and blood sacrifice of Jesus brings us forgiveness and life that will last forever as God dwells not in the temple, but in all who feast on this sacrifice by faith.

¹ Luther, M. (1999). [*Luther's works, vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8*](#). (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 23, p. 135). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

17. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.
⁵⁵For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.
18. This is a remarkable promise that we do well to receive. Jesus declares that as you believe in Him, you will abide in Him and He in you. He takes up residence in you and makes His home there. It is as if He says: “It doesn’t matter if you are still weak, for I am in you. If you lack anything, I have an abundance of righteousness, holiness, and wisdom [for you]...if you are weak, your weakness is in Me...I drown your weakness in My strength and power, I delete your sin in My righteousness, and I devour your death in My life.”²
19. This is the hope these words of Jesus offers. It is not a vain hope that is disconnected from the troubles of this life. It is spoken directly to our situation today and our longing for life to return to some kind of normal. It encourages us not to be short sighted when it comes to the promises of God, but to expect so much more than we frequently settle for. Eating and drinking the flesh and blood of Jesus – whether its wrapped up in the bread and wine of the supper, or His words of promise, this flesh and blood provides forgiveness and true life – both here and in eternity.
20. Luther had a way of getting to the crux of a text like this in a very earthy and sometimes provocative way. At the risk of offending your modern sensitivities, I’d like to share a few words that he preached on this text to those faced with the uncertainty of life and death in his time. He said “Just go ahead and die in God’s name, submit to being burned or killed in a different manner. You are still assured of eternal life; it will surely be yours. To die, to be buried, to have people tread on your grave, to be consumed by worms—all this will not matter to you. It is certain that Christ will raise you up again. For here you have His promise: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” [And at that time] your eyes will behold what your faith so confidently relies on now.³
21. God grant you this very confidence of faith in the flesh and blood of Jesus, that you can face the uncertainty of these days, with unshakeable trust in the forgiveness and life that is yours in Jesus’ name. Amen.

² Luther, M. (1999). [*Luther’s works, vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8*](#). (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 23, pp. 147–148). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

³ Luther, M. (1999). [*Luther’s works, vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8*](#). (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 23, p. 131). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.