

[1 Kings 8: 22-30](#)

[Psalm 84](#)

[Ephesians 6:10-20](#)

[John 6:53-69](#)

August 25, 2024

SERMON:

THE TREE OF LIFE

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Summary: O Taste, and see that the Lord is good.

This book I am holding has a single purpose and a single meaning. Its meaning is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and its purpose is to reveal who He is and what He requires of us.

The OT was written by a great number of authors and editors over a period of fifteen hundred years. They did not see themselves as writing a single story and none of them had never heard of Jesus.

Nonetheless, while they regarded themselves as writing history, poetry, wisdom sayings, prophecies, and so on, they were in fact all working – wittingly or not – to fulfill God’s purpose, and that purpose was and remains to tell the story of his Son. Luke tells us about the conversation the resurrected Christ had with two of his followers on the road to Emmaus:

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the [Hebrew] scriptures – the Old Testament – concerning himself. (24: 27)

When we come to the Gospels, the true meaning of all those foreshadowings and intimations of God’s intention for His creation are at last revealed, the main

character steps upon the stage, and we finally see what all the rest of it had really been about. “The time is now fulfilled,” Jesus says at the very beginning of his earthly ministry. “and the kingdom of God is at hand.” What once had been shadow becomes substance, what once had been vague and allusive and metaphorical becomes flesh and blood, what once had been myth becomes history. The Old Testament, as St. Augustine wrote, is the NT concealed; the NT is the OT revealed. It is in Jesus that we learn the true meaning of Noah’s ark and the Ark of the Covenant, of the deliverance from Egypt and the entry into Promised Land, of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and King David, and of countless other veiled mysteries besides, including, I believe, going back the very beginning, the truth of The Tree of Life, the one in the center of the Heaven on earth.

With that in mind, let’s turn to our final reading this morning, this one the Gospel of John: chapter 6:

vv. 53-69

For the last several weeks, we’ve been reading through the sixth chapter of John’s gospel, and today’s reading brings that section of the lectionary to a conclusion. It is in that sixth chapter that the full revelation of Christ comes for the first time fully and explicitly to the fore, along with its true significance for all of us. It at last pulls back the veil that had covered the revelation of God throughout all of human history, and lets the full light of God’s countenance shine through.

But here’s what’s important, here’s what matters to us, After having spoken in no uncertain terms about who he, Jesus, claims to be, and what he, Jesus requires, John tells us the following:

From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.

This is not a feel-good part of the Bible, and it would be idle words spoken from the pulpit to sugar-coat it, or to soften its message. It brings the reader into personal relationship with who Jesus is actually claiming to be, and with what he is actually asking us to do. It asks us to confront the same difficulty that confronted them.

His disciples did not stop following Jesus because he taught about how God loves all his children or how we should all love and be kind and forgiving to one another; any more than was Jesus crucified because he brought a message of loving brotherhood and sisterhood. He was crucified because what he had to say was

scandalous and repellant, perhaps even insane-sounding, to many who heard him; and that's exactly how it seemed to many of his closest followers, once the full light of his revelation began to shine on them. And I'm afraid, that's how they sound to many even today.

And what could the disciples not bring themselves to accept? There are two things.

First, Jesus is actually claiming to be the one and only hope for eternal life.

And second, he is actually asking us to eat of his body, and drink of his blood.

Consider the first. The Jewish disciples of Jesus were lifelong disciples of Moses as well. Couldn't they continue as followers of Moses, couldn't they accept Jesus as perhaps a new Moses, and share their loyalty between the old and the new?

And what about us? How many are there of us whose Christian faith is uncomfortable with the exclusivity that Christ demands. There are many – including many who would consider themselves to be Christian - who would insist that Jesus was a wise and profoundly good ethical teacher, as have been a certain few other eminences throughout human history. Follow him if you choose, they might say; or alternatively follow the Buddha, or follow the Tao, or follow Mohammed, or follow Karl Marx: all walk basically the same path, all travel towards the same destination; all are equally reliable guides to the good and moral life.

To them, as he does to us, Jesus says: I am the way. Not a way. The way.

And how many of us seek our own truth in our desires and priorities and abilities and sensitivities and personalities – we even in modern jargon say “This is *my* truth, the one that's unique to me because of what a unique individual I am.”

To all of those who seek their own, private truth, Jesus says, “I am the truth.” Not a truth. Not your truth. Not my truth. The truth.

And how many are there of us who seek their life in art, who seek their life in politics, who seek their life in charity and philanthropy, who seek their life in the march of history or science or technology, who seek their life in their own moral intuitions and consciences, their own family pride, who seek their life in their own accomplishments, whether they be material or intellectual or spiritual.

To them, Jesus says: I am the life. Not a life. The life.

For those who think Christianity is simple and undemanding that it accepts everything else they themselves value, Jesus has one clear, unambiguous, and extraordinarily difficult thing to say:

I am the Way, the truth and the life. And then he adds, in case anyone misunderstands: *No one comes to the Father except by me.*

Most of the Christian walk is relatively easy, for most of us, and thank God for that: It's easy to come to church, it can even be a joy. It's easy to sing psalms and throw some money in the collection plate. It's easy to bake cookies for a sale, and do charity work, and help your neighbor out, especially if you have a generous nature to begin with. None of that is really hard. What's hard is to believe someone who says to you "I and I alone have the key to eternal life, and I must be the one true reality in your life, while all the rest takes second place behind me." That sounds like the crazy boast of a megalomaniac in an asylum. And yet that is the first thing every Christian must say and in his or heart believe. There is no other key to life, there is no other way to heaven.

As C.S. Lewis so famously put it: *You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the [Son of God](#), or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God...*

But how do we acquire this faith, if we don't already have it? How do we nourish it and grow it if we do?

That brings us to the second, perhaps even crazier-sounding thing Jesus tells his followers, as a result of which many of them turned away.

He says to them, as he says to us: "...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (53)

And then he repeatedly hammers the thought home:

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

We modern folks, reading these words, are prone to think that Jesus must have been speaking poetically, using the images of eating his flesh and drinking his blood to stand for following his instructions or perhaps meditating on his words.

But Jesus wasn't talking to literary critics or academic theologians when he said these things: he was talking to rough, hard-scrabble people without much education. What they heard was that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. No wonder so many of them turned away. Here was truly a crazy man!

It wasn't until the last night of his life that Jesus fully unveiled his meaning, when he broke the bread and said *This is my body. Take, eat*, and when he poured the cup and said *Drink thee all of this. This is my blood*. That focused our attention on the bread and the wine, but it didn't make the instruction any less extraordinary, any less difficult to understand or accept. Because now the instruction – his final instruction to his disciples and to all of us – becomes: Unless you eat this bread and drink this cup, you have no life in you.

And once again, we modern folks, reading these words, are prone to think that Jesus must have been speaking poetically, using the images of eating the bread of communion and drinking the wine of communion to stand for following his instructions or perhaps meditating on his words or something along those lines. But that's not how the disciples gathered around the table that night understood his words. They took him to mean that eating this communion bread and drinking from this communion cup was to be the foundational sacrament of the Christian life, which is eternal life. *Unless you eat this bread and drink this cup, you have no life in you*. What words can be plainer than that?

And the disciples took this meal and this instruction out into the world. One of the charges often brought against the early Christian churches was that they engaged in cannibalism: a comic misunderstanding but one which points to the utter seriousness and literalness with which these Christians approached the table.

And our good Saint Paul, in the same letter to the Corinthians in which he formulated the words of institution that we use to this very day, in that same letter, he reproached his readers for not taking the communion with a full and solemn appreciation of its importance: "*Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner...eats and drinks judgment on himself.*"

You can remain neutral about the theories that theologians have offered about the spiritual relationship between the bread and wine and Christ's body and blood; but what you cannot remain neutral about is the foundational importance of the Communion table. Baptism is the new birth of the life of God in you; but the Communion table is the mother's milk that nourishes that birth from the time we are able to receive it and for the rest of our lives. That's how important it is, that's how solemn and serious it is.

I'll close with a testimony. I was baptized as an infant, and thus received the new birth. But that birth lay dormant within me for many, many years, and my personal

life through those decades demonstrated a steady and ever more precipitous decline in every spiritual virtue. It was an utterly self-centered life, full of deception and desperation and failure, a life that damaged many others along its way, and that produced literally nothing that would be of spiritual benefit to anyone. It was a prodigal life, like that of the son in our Lord's greatest parable, a life reduced to finding satisfaction in food suitable for pigs.

And then one Sunday, over thirty years ago now, I happened to find myself attending a Catholic morning mass with a friend of mine in Cleveland. Near the end of the Mass, during the communion portion, even though I was cynical and embarrassed about it, even a little guilty because I'm not Catholic, my friend persuaded me to step into the line and participate. And I did so.

Looking back at it from where I stand before you today, I testify to you that that communion bread and wine, that morning, awoke and gave the first nourishment to my Christian soul that it had ever received; and I testify that from that moment on, with countless setbacks and failures and stumbling still ahead, my life nonetheless found itself on a different path, with a different guide, and a different destination.

The Old Testament, as St. Augustine wrote, is the NT concealed; the NT is the OT revealed.

The Communion meal, I believe, is the true Tree of Life, from which, God told us at the very beginning, we may eat, and live forever.

Does that sound crazy to you?

And so, heavenly Father, our prayer for this message is that you instill in each of our hearts the awareness of the seriousness of our purpose when we come to your table, that you humble us as we when we eat the fruit of the Tree of Life, that you rejoice with us when we receive the true mother's milk of our material lives, when we incorporate into our own broken lives the divine fortitude and the divine joy of your Beloved Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.