

Lectionary 19 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 8, 2021

John 6:35, 41-51

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

It depends upon what the meaning of “is” is. That’s a famous quotation of President Bill Clinton. *It depends upon what the meaning of “is” is.* If you find yourself in front of a grand jury trying to explain how you lied about adultery, sometimes you have to go to extraordinary lengths. *It depends upon what the meaning of “is” is.*

Clinton made that statement about one year after I was ordained as a pastor. I wish he had said it a few years earlier, because it would have helped with my seminary education. Perhaps the most investigated words in the Bible are these words: “This is my body, given for you: do this in remembrance of me.” This *IS* my body. This *IS* my blood of the covenant. This cup *IS* the new covenant. It depends upon what the meaning of “is” is. Is it a metaphor? This bread is like my body. This bread symbolizes my body. Or is it a supernatural promise? This really is my body. Through some process of prayer or remembering or consecration, this bread really becomes my body or contains my body. It depends upon what the meaning of “is” is.

And as you know— I think you know, I hope you know— Christian churches are divided about whether it really is the body and blood, or whether it is symbolism. And if it really is the body and blood, how and when it becomes those things. Does it require a priest? Does it require the right words? Is it transubstantiation?

The New Testament is written in Greek. But Jesus didn’t speak Greek. And when people try to recreate Jesus’ original words in the original language— which is a highly speculative project, with no guarantee of accuracy— some of the smart ones conclude that Jesus never said “is” because in his language that verb is not used like that. So they say Jesus actually said something like *This my body. This my blood.* If that’s true, then centuries of Christians fighting amongst ourselves about the meaning of “is” has all been in vain.

For the last couple of weeks, I’ve been saying that the Lord’s Supper that we commonly call Holy Communion is anchored in the feeding of the five thousand in John’s understanding of Jesus Christ. (In the fourth gospel.) In other words, while we mostly think of Holy Communion as something that Jesus instituted at the Last Supper, John’s gospel offers a concurring opinion that Holy Communion is based in the Feeding of the Five Thousand in the middle of Jesus’ ministry. Not in the last supper of Holy Week. In today’s gospel, Jesus says “*the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*” In this context of the feeding of the five thousand,

Jesus says that the bread of life is his flesh. Very close to the words “this is my body given for you” which are more familiar to Christians like me and you. But not quite the same. The word flesh is used instead of the word body. And the giving is not “for you” but for the life of the world.

These words matter. They matter greatly. They matter now more than they did fifty years ago or five hundred years ago. Because they are a re-framing of the Lord’s Supper. Not just a clever new perspective from some imaginative individual. But an apostolic perspective. From the author of the fourth gospel. From the authority of the fourth gospel. The churches are divided over these words “This is my body.” *It depends upon what the meaning of “is” is.* But what if there was no “is” in Jesus’ original statements? Or what if we all looked to John’s Gospel, to today’s reading: *The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.* What if all the churches looked to that for guidance? Or what if all the churches just made an effort to include this perspective?

I can tell you that dyed-in-the-wool Lutherans— to pick a group of Christians at random— would have to open our minds and our hearts. Lutherans really emphasize the “for you” in the Lord’s Supper. Jesus gave his life for you. The promise is for you. If you believe the promise, then the blessing will be for you. That’s very Lutheran. It’s a sacrament. It’s a benefit. It’s grace that you receive, and that works for your benefit. The word “is” is literal, and is a promise, and is true. It is his body, because he said so. That’s all Lutheran. It’s all true. It’s all good. It’s all in the Bible.

But today’s gospel stresses life, not grace. And it stresses the world, not your personal soul. The word is *cosmos*, which means world, universe, creation. To participate in the Lord’s Supper is to participate in a bigger project than simply the spiritual benefit of your own soul. And that’s just the beginning of how this sixth chapter of John can expand our understanding of the Lord’s Supper. And under the guidance of the Holy Spirit might possibly bring greater sharing, greater unity, greater works, to the churches that are now divided.

In our congregation, I think that the integrity of our worship lies in our ability to hold together the multiple meanings of the Lord’s Supper. Not to expound and defend a narrow meaning of the Lord’s Supper. In this sermon, I have been careful to say Lord’s Supper. Because that has one set of meanings. The word communion has another set. The word eucharist has another set. The term sacrament of the altar has another shade of meaning. And the word mass has yet another set of implications. And all of these words belong to us. All of them are legitimate in our tradition. For me, as the called and installed pastor of this congregation, integrity lies in practices which embrace the fullness of these meanings. And my perspective is different from other pastors and other congregations, where integrity means defending one meaning to the exclusion of others. And perhaps only allowing communion for people who are willing to subscribe to that one particular interpretation. We are broad and liberal and inclusive in our practice of the Lord’s Supper. Not because we lack conviction or principles. But because of the absolute reverence that we have for something that is too sacred and too powerful for us to limit. And along with

that, a corollary to that, is that we have reverence and fidelity to the Bible, which itself speaks with more than one voice, more than one authority, on this subject.

It depends upon what the meaning of "is" is. Many sermons have probably been inspired by President Clinton's adultery. They have probably been sermons on adultery and sex and marriage, and not on the Lord's Supper. But today's gospel is a challenge for us to quit debating what "is" is, and to live in the fullness of the life that Jesus said he came to bring to us all, and to the world. Amen.