

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Where do you go to church? How do you decide? What is church for? These are some of the questions we explore as we conclude our Adult instruction talking about Divine Service and Christian Service. Kevin and Michelle today have answered the latter question and so are saying today in answer to the first: “The Evangelical Lutheran Church is where we go.” Indeed, I suggest you’re here at Zion today because you agree with them.

What is church for? Or what is it about? Today one finds many answers to these questions, but Jesus’ answer boils down to what is her message. And what is the foundation of that message. It always has been; it always will be.

Jesus tells us this very thing in the Gospel today, but before we get to Jesus’ words, let me remind you of the larger narrative. Jesus had performed a miracle; He had fed 5,000 plus people with five loaves and two small fish. They ate to their fill, and the disciples gathered together twelve baskets full of leftovers. We heard about this miracle from the parallel account from Mark 6 a couple weeks ago; it’s recounted in the first part of John 6, too. Then last week, you heard about the disciples getting into a boat to travel to the other side of the sea while Jesus stayed behind. The disciples later saw Jesus walking on the water and were frightened, but Jesus calmed their fears, and they arrived safely in Capernaum on the other side. That’s where we pick things up in our Gospel.

The people saw that Jesus was no longer in the same place, and they pursued Jesus and the disciples to Capernaum. They found Jesus there and said to Him: “*Rabbi, when did you come here?*” Now that sounds innocent enough, but Jesus knew what was in their hearts. He answered them, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes*” That is, Jesus chastises these people for their focus on their bellies, not recognizing the greater food this miraculous bounty pointed to.

Dear friends, this is the state of much of the church in America today — more interested in one’s personal prosperity and happiness than in the Gospel, than in Jesus Christ. It is a “fake Christianity,” says George Barna, a researcher who polls Americans and analyzes the state of the Church in America. In his “American Worldview Inventory 2021,” Barna states that “Moral Therapeutic Deism” is the worldview held by most Americans, and this is a “watered-down, feel-good, fake Christianity.” Barna explains, “The moralistic perspective is we’re here to be good people and to try to do good.” “The therapeutic aspect is everything is supposed to be geared to making me feel good about myself, ultimately to make me happy.” And

“Deism is the idea that God created the world but has no direct involvement in it.” Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD) ... in essence, it teaches “there is a distant God who just wants everyone to be nice, and the purpose of life is to be happy” (Rachel Bratton, “The American Church Has Fallen: Shocking Poll Shows ‘Fake Christianity’ Has Supplanted the Biblical Worldview, *Western Journal*, July 4, 2021), to which we Lutherans ask, “Where is Jesus?” Truly, much of American Christianity is a fake Christianity with their eyes fixed on self and not on Jesus.

Of course, it’s not that Jesus or the church is not interested in creaturely things, after all Jesus did feed the multitudes, and the church, sometimes herself and sometimes through her agencies, assists those in need with food and clothing and shelter and so forth. Such is our life together under our “one head, Christ,” as Luther reminds us, to be “diligently joined in ... works of love” (Luther, Smalcald Articles, Second Part, IV:9). Jesus even instructs us to pray for our daily bread, and this “includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body” Luther reminds us (Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, 4th Petition).

But, as Jesus teaches us today, “*the food that perishes*” was not His main focus, and it is not His church’s main focus, either. Jesus says, “*but [work] for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.*” Eternal food was Jesus’ focus, and St. Paul’s, too: God gave “*the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.*” This is the Church’s focus — unity of the faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

What then is this food that endures? First, Jesus says, this food is a gift from the Son of Man Himself. To work for the food that endures is first to recognize who the giver is and then to receive this food with thanksgiving ... in faith.

Second, Jesus says this faith is truly the work of God, not a moralistic trying to be good and do good, but believing “*in him whom [God the Father] has sent,*” and upon whom “*the Father has set his seal.*” The Father did send Jesus for a specific work. The Father set His seal on His beloved Son at His baptism, marking Him as the Lamb of God bearing the sins of the world. Marked further by thorns and nails and spear, Jesus wears these marks still to bear witness to our salvation, to the empowering of our baptisms, to the giver of the heavenly food, which we shall eat for our forgiveness and life.

Third, Jesus says that He is not only the giver; He is the very food itself which endures. Jesus said, “*the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*” At the Father’s side from the beginning, the Son of Man

descended from heaven, that He might be lifted high, that eyes might behold Him, that hearts might believe in Him, that they might have everlasting life (John 3).

And Jesus can give life to the world because “*in Him was life*” (John 1:4). To be sure, Jesus died — He died for us, for our salvation, to atone for our sins — but Jesus lives. “*We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him*” (Rom. 6:9). He is “*the resurrection and the life,*” who promises life to us (John 11:25). Jesus lives to give us life, which He gives to us in the waters of Holy Baptism: “*if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him*” (Rom. 6:8).

This faith, then, is nourished and strengthened as we partake of the food that endures, which Jesus gives at this altar, and this, too, is Jesus Himself, as He said, “*I am the bread of life.*” This food may not satisfy your temporal hunger or slake your temporal thirst, for this food is for eternity, but this food does something greater. This food strengthens you in the true faith and in fervent love toward others. Eat of this food and you shall neither hunger nor thirst for anything save righteousness.

So, friends, this is what the church is: the body of Christ, gathered together to partake of Christ, the very bread from heaven. This is why we’re here. This is what we are about. The church does other things, to be sure, but this is her main focus. Anything else — like moralism, personal prosperity, talk of an impersonal, distant God uninterested in us — is false; it’s unbiblical; it’s a “fake Christianity” from which we should flee.

Kevin and Michelle aren’t fleeing today. They are coming forward boldly to confess Jesus before men, having eaten of the food that endures to eternal life and wanting more in the Holy Sacrament of Jesus’ body and blood. We welcome them as they join us at His table to feast upon the Bread of Life.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.