

What Happens After the Party?
Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent
Sermon Text: John 6:47-51

⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

The drawer doesn't work anymore because the cabinet is too full and the dresser is overflowing with stuff. Some of the junk has ended up in the basement but even that is filled to the ceiling. And let's not talk about the refrigerator. We have too much stuff! This excessiveness overwhelms us and is also dangerous because it seeps into our thoughts. Daily we busy ourselves with so much information which flutters through our thoughts in seconds before they land in the trash bin of our subconscious. But we still have a hunger, and we must take this hunger seriously. Whoever feels alone, whoever searches for acceptance, or whoever feels crushed with worry, these people often experience a type of hunger that affects them in the core of their existence. Night and day such people busy themselves with questions like: *"How can I win back the love I lost?" "How can I finally be taken seriously?" "How can I regain the trust I once had in my children?"* There is a hunger that cannot be satisfied with bread and there is a hunger that cannot be fulfilled with power, fame, money, or pleasure. This spiritual hunger can be just as painful as physical deprivation and shows that next to sustenance, we also need love, community, and fulfillment in order to truly be satisfied. People have hunger.

Jesus addresses our need. He had already fed 5,000 people who had physical hunger. He provided them with delicious grilled fish and freshly baked bread. They all sat with one another and ate well. The good food led to a relaxed and joyful party atmosphere. But then everything was over. They all went back home and returned to their normal everyday lives. The old worries returned and they asked themselves: *"Was that all there was to it?"* This question is quite understandable if you have just had an encounter with the Son of God. I can well imagine that some thought that the Son of God had more to bring than just a barbecue in the yard. Others might have asked themselves: *"How can we have Jesus at our side all the time so that He brings us fresh rolls every morning?"* And this is exactly where Jesus comes in and begins to explain what it means that He satisfies our hunger. He addresses the mood after the party. He addresses the feelings of people who have had their fill and who ask themselves: *"And if I now have everything I need to live and still feel hungry – what can truly satisfy me?"* Or *"When I've managed to finish my education, gotten my right to stay in Germany, finally have enough money in my bank account, finally found the love that I've been looking for... then what?"* But we can also extend this question to our lives as Christians: *"If I have been baptized and confirmed and have since learned how a Christian should behave – what happens then?"*

At first, Jesus surprised the people with the great miracle of the bread. This made everyone curious about what else He had to offer. But in the conversation, Jesus by no means wanted to describe people's needs as unimportant. Rather, He asked: *"What's behind all this?"* Jesus was certainly happy to eat fish and bread with all the people, but He also wanted us to understand who the great "I Am" is – He who was, who is, and who is to come. This led to an exciting discussion that ultimately revolved around the question: *"Who is Jesus anyway?"* In the discussion it became clear that it is not only important that we understand *who* Jesus is but also understand that He draws near to us. So near in fact that we eat Him. Only when Jesus is in us will we know who He is. Jesus challenged the people of that time to connect themselves more and more tightly with Jesus. They should believe in Jesus.

In the conversation, Jesus refers to Moses and the manna in the desert. At that time, God had also fed His people with manna from heaven. However, this was not a glorious episode in the history of God's people because the people didn't believe in God despite this miracle. So the miracle of the bread, like everything else, was also something after which people asked: "*What happens next?*" Above all, the central question is: "*What happens at the end? What happens when the party of a lifetime is over? What happens when my life has come to an end?*" Jesus says what comes next – it's another bread that is even more than the manna of Moses; this bread is Jesus Himself. Only Jesus can stand as mediator between God and people, and He is the true bread that satisfies hunger. Jesus' sacrifice shows us that His sacrifice also has a completely different quality. We are to enjoy more than just a meal; we are to be part of Jesus. We are to eat His flesh? This statement makes one thing clear to us from the beginning, namely that it is Jesus Himself who says this, meaning that Jesus is the host. When it comes to physical food, I go to the grocery store and buy according to the tastes and criteria I impose upon myself such as: calories, fat content, and vitamins. Simply what I need. But when it comes to spiritual nourishment, only God knows what we truly need and what is good for us. Then we must know from the outset that some things cannot go through the censorship of our mind. That's why God must decide and not our intellect! God alone is the host and may decide what I need for my soul. In Psalm 23, Scripture tells us: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." God does this! We can't do this! When someone asks me what I feel at communion, I cannot describe it convincingly. I can only ever point to God. At this point, He alone knows what He gives me.

The New Testament repeatedly explains that Jesus and God's Word are interchangeable, almost identical. This makes it clear that Jesus Himself is the food that we need as spiritual nourishment. So Jesus is not talking about food that merely fills the mind and thereby nourishes us spiritually, but about the fact that we are nourished through Him – with His own flesh. In doing so, Jesus presented the questioners of His time with a huge challenge: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you*" (John 6:53). Admittedly, this sounds strange at first – almost like cannibalism. For the Jews of that time, who strictly avoided both contact with corpses and handling blood, this statement was particularly difficult to understand. But we also find this difficult. Many people were therefore tempted to water down these words by saying that the whole thing was only meant symbolically. They claimed that we eat bread and drink wine here on earth to remind us of Jesus who is in heaven. But if we only have an image of Christ and do not really receive Him ourselves, we remain hungry and are not truly nourished; if we only remember Christ but do not have Him within us, then we are truly poor. Then we do not possess the true food but only a menu with pictures of the food – without being allowed to eat it ourselves. We would be like people looking through a window at a magnificent feast, seeing the most delicious food – and yet not being able to enjoy any of it.

Dear congregation, we cannot and should not be satisfied with food that only partially satisfies our minds. Instead, we should and may truly receive the whole Christ, dwell in Him – and He in us. The whole thing cannot be grasped with words or with the mind. We can only say again and again: it's about Jesus. The fact that we receive Jesus in bread and wine comes from Himself. He said: "Take and eat – this is My body... Take and drink – this is My blood." Because He said it, He is it. It's about Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Even today, He is here with us and in us – in the Lord's Supper. Amen.