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Pentecost 20 – Hebrews 10:22-31 – How to Have a Healthy (Spiritual) Diet

10/11-15/23 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

You all know that in the last year and a half or so, I've lost a lot of weight. To get from where I was back then to where I am now, I've had to learn what a healthy lifestyle looks like, and maybe most of all, I've had to learn how to have a healthy diet. I've had to make a conscious effort to plan a place and time for regular exercise; I've had to remind myself to make sure I'm drinking lots of water and a lot less Mountain Dew; I've had to be smart about what I make myself to eat for breakfast, lunch, and a mid-afternoon snack, and I've had to be careful about how much I'm eating of whatever delicious thing my wife normally makes for supper. I've learned maybe most of all that being healthy is about trending in the right direction and building sustainable habits, and I'm thankful to say that's worked for me. It's been very encouraging.

But it's also true that those encouragements in my life were balanced by some warnings. Around the time that I started trying to be healthier, I lost two good friends – one from COVID, a pastor friend from Kansas City; and one from cancer here at Good Shepherd. Both of those men left wives and young children behind, and I knew that if I didn't start taking better care of myself, that could be me, too. Sometimes encouragements and warnings have to work together in our lives to open our eyes to what we really, truly most *need*, and that's what we see in our Second Lesson from Hebrews for today. We see strong encouragement and stern warning when it comes to the blessings and consequences of faithful spiritual growth, or lack thereof. You might say the writer to the Hebrews was trying to teach them – and all of us along with them – how to have a healthy spiritual diet: first, let's feed our faith in worship and fellowship here at God's house; and second, let's avoid spiritual starvation.

So here was the situation: as best we can tell, this letter was written to Jewish Christians who lived in Rome, probably about 30 years after Jesus went back to heaven. Persecution and social pressures against Christians were starting to ramp up at that time, and these believers were considering giving up on Jesus because of it. But the whole purpose of this letter was to convince them that Jesus is what their souls really need, and he's the only one who can truly satisfy their spiritual hunger. So for members of that Church who struggled with opposition, or with embarrassment or indifference, or maybe just with that age-old problem of spiritual apathy – and for members of our Church who might struggle with those same things still today – this writer's message is, don't draw *back* from God; rather, draw *near* to God and his Church all the more, because that's the answer for how to have a healthy spiritual diet!

He says, “*Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*” Any doctor would tell you that having a healthy physical diet is very

much connected to heart health with your stress levels and cholesterol levels and so forth. Well having a healthy spiritual diet is all about heart health, too. God wants us to draw near to him with a *sincere* heart, a heart that is genuinely devoted to him, not one that just pretends with empty words. He wants us to draw near to him with the full assurance of faith, completely confident of everything God has done for us and promised us. He sprinkled our hearts with Jesus' blood shed for us on the cross; he cleansed us from a guilty conscience when Jesus wiped away all our wrongs and made them white as snow; and he washed our bodies with pure water when he washed away our sins in holy baptism. That body and blood Jesus gave for your forgiveness on the cross is the same body and blood he still delivers to you in his Supper, and that washing you received in holy baptism is the same washing you get to relive every time you come here to God's house for worship. In the confession and absolution at the beginning of the service and again in Holy Communion toward the end of the service, our loving Lord invites us to draw near to God with a sincere heart and the full assurance of faith, and that's exactly what God works in us through a healthy diet of his Word and Sacraments.

But just like a healthy physical diet always prepares us for good physical exercise, it's that same way with our spiritual lives, too. God feeds our faith with his Word and Sacraments, and the first way we can exercise that faith is by confessing it together: “*Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*” There's lots of junk food out there that might taste good going down, but really only hurts your health in the end. The same goes for spiritual junk food – you might hear lots of things on TV or the radio or the internet that might sound nice or seem okay at first, but they really just turn out to be feel-good fluff in the end. But when we come together here at church, we gather around the hearty spiritual meat of Biblical Law and Gospel. We strengthen and sharpen each other to hold onto the trustworthy truth of God's Word and never let it go. And when we confess that faith together like we do in the Creeds, we're professing to the world around us that there is nothing more satisfying for our souls than trusting in Jesus, worshipping him, and living for him.

And when we make that confession with our mouths, God also wants us to back it up with our actions. “*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds... encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*” A bad physical diet can make you tired and sluggish, but a good diet gives you energy and endurance. Well, our sinfulness naturally makes our souls tired and sluggish too, so we need a good spiritual diet of God's Word and Sacraments to help us spur each other on, not with guilt and grumbling like we can so easily fall into, but with Gospel encouragement toward Christian love and good deeds. I mean, when someone tells you they love you, they've been thinking about you, they've been praying for you, doesn't that lift you up? When someone does something for you out of the goodness of their heart, just because they love you and love Jesus, doesn't that make you want to pay it forward? Doesn't that motivate you toward love and good deeds yourself? You know, sitting around a table together sharing a meal together is one of the best ways to connect with

family and friends, and that's exactly what we're doing spiritually when we come here together to God's house. Whether it's fellowship time with coffee and donuts or with our potluck meal coming up at the end of the month; or service opportunities like our LOGS group or this LWMS rally and Fall Festival coming up next week, encouraging each other with Christian love and good deeds brings us together as God's family of faith.

And see, that's really what God wants for us as church members: in Word and Sacrament, in worship and fellowship, he wants to serve us up a heaping helping of encouragement. The devil knows how important a healthy spiritual diet is for us, so he tries to keep us apart and unengaged. But that's actually why we need each other all the more. We come together to encourage each other, especially with the world going further and further away from God the closer to the Last Day that we get. So don't let the devil convince you, "I'm doing fine, I don't need to be encouraged, I don't need to come to church all that often." If you feel that way, then think instead of how you can encourage someone else. Come here to build up your fellow believers, because the truth is, throughout our lives, we all need that mutual encouragement for our souls every bit as much as we need food and drink for our bodies, and coming together for worship and fellowship is how God intends for us to give and receive it in the best way. God says this is how to have a healthy spiritual diet, and he serves it up for us right here in his house!

So there are great encouragements and blessings in store for us when we have a healthy spiritual diet, but then the opposite is also true. If you stop eating physically, we all know what's going to happen. You get weak, you get thin, you starve, eventually you die. If a person stops eating physically, we call that an eating disorder and we recognize that it's a dangerous, maybe even fatal problem in that person's life. Well make no mistake, the same is true if a person stops eating spiritually. If a person stops coming to God's house, hearing God's Word, receiving God's Sacraments regularly and often like we need and like he wants, that is a spiritual eating disorder that can be just as damaging to their souls. Without a healthy spiritual diet, that person's faith will get weak and starve and maybe even die.

So that's why our writer is so serious in his warning to the Hebrews here: "*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing... If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.*" Remember what the point at issue was for these Hebrews. They were thinking about giving up on Christ to make it easier for themselves, and the first symptom of that was that they stopped meeting together as a Church. Rather than forming a solid habit of faithful public worship, they fell into the habit of letting everything else come first instead. They didn't "remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy" – they didn't prioritize their relationship with God and *make* time to worship him like he wanted and like their souls needed. The writer here says that is deliberate sin that deserves God's punishment, and that is still just as true for us today. We, too, have received the knowledge of the truth in youth confirmation classes and adult Bible instruction courses, and that's a vow that

every person makes when they become a member of the Church. To go back on that vow, to promise faithfulness to God's Word and worship and then prove that that promise was really just an empty lie – the writer warns us here that giving up on Jesus in the end really only gives up the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

In fact, he gets even more specific here: "*How much do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?*" There's nothing more insulting to a chef than when you turn up your nose and send back whatever they put their heart and soul into making for you. Well, the writer says that we do the same thing to God when we don't have a healthy spiritual diet. That's like trampling the Son of God underfoot, he says – acting like Jesus is as worthless to us as the dust on our shoes. It's treating the blood he shed to save us like it means nothing to us – isn't even worth our time, isn't even worth getting out of bed and getting dressed for. It's insulting the Spirit of grace – showing no appreciation to the one who has been so good to us and giving him no opportunities to work with his Word and Sacraments in our hearts. It hurts the Holy Spirit and it really hurts us most of all, because the writer warns that for everyone who treats God's Word and worship that way, "*It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*" This is nothing less than a matter of eternal life and death, he says, because if we're starving ourselves spiritually, if we aren't getting good spiritual meals, then we can be sure that the devil will be trying that much harder to make us *his* next meal.

So the choice couldn't be more crystal clear here, could it: spiritual health and life, or spiritual starvation and death? The encouragements and blessings that go along with a healthy spiritual diet couldn't be stronger, and the warnings and consequences of going without that couldn't be sterner. Friends, there is no greater privilege that church members have than God's invitation to draw near to him, right here in his house through his Word and Sacraments, and so there is no greater responsibility that we have than to prioritize our spiritual growth. Our souls need God's Word and Sacraments, worship and fellowship, time in God's House around God's Table as much as our bodies need food, drink, and air to live. So if you've been struggling with this, remember the great gifts that Jesus serves up for you right here: forgiveness for sin, new life, and eternal salvation. If you've been coming to church irregularly or having a hard time finding a good routine, make a conscious effort to put it on the calendar more consistently and more often – your souls will be blessed for it! If you have friends or family members who are falling into this trap, don't let the devil have them. Encourage them, invite them, remind them all the more that right here in God's house, our Savior feeds us the healthy spiritual diet we need: forgiveness and fellowship, through Word and Sacrament, both now and forever. Amen.