

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

Many of you know that I love the Tour de France; in case you don't know, it's a bicycle race that circles France every July. These yearly grand tours (there's also one in Italy and one in Spain) are perhaps the hardest sporting events on earth. They are 21-day tours that challenge riders over more than 2,000 miles. They buck headwinds and crosswinds; they scale lofty mountains in the rarified air and brave breathtaking descents on narrow, mountain roads. And do you know what it takes to do all that—besides being unbelievable cyclists going unbelievable speeds? It takes food and drink! If the riders don't eat and drink all along each stage route, their bodies will simply not be able to go. Their bodies will run out of fuel.

They've got to eat and drink, for "*the journey is too great*" for them. And for any of you who keep up on the scandals that cycling has gone through in recent years, yes, it's also true that the journey is so great that for at least the last two decades, cyclists have been using "performance-enhancing drugs," just to get them through the grueling race.

When it comes to our Christian life, dear friends, "*the journey is too great*" for us, too. We've got to eat and drink, in order to keep the faith and finish the race. For, you see, I'm using this annual grand tour in July as a metaphor for the Christian life, even as the Scripture uses the figure of a race to describe it—not cycling, but running. And Scripture doesn't hold back in its description of the struggle (using another cycling metaphor, you might say, Scripture admits that we aren't just going to coast through life). Rather, it says, "*let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run **with endurance** the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,*" For you see, that "*journey is ... great.*" Jesus also says, "***the way is hard that leads to life.***"

Now I know for many people, certainly even Lutherans, that's not what they come to church to hear. I've heard Lutherans say it...maybe you've said it yourself. They don't want to hear about the struggle; they don't want to hear about the sin-caused difficulties, the tribulations, the suffering. They complain: "*they don't want to hear about complaining and grumbling.*" They just want to be lifted up. They just want to feel good about themselves. They just want to come to church to smile and laugh the whole way through.

Poor things! They don't get it. That's not what we're promised as Christians. Rather, we're told, "*The journey is too great.*" "*The way is hard that leads to life.*" We must "*run with endurance the race that is set before us.*" Life is tough, and especially if you want to live it "*set apart*"—that is, in holiness and godliness, living it as Christians. People will probably be mean to you. They may not try to kill you like Jezebel did to Elijah, but they may threaten you like people did with Memories Pizza in Walkerton, IN. They may try to destroy you, if not financially,

at least your reputation—ruin your good name. St. Peter says, *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”*

Indeed, we shouldn’t be surprised, for you know that as you run the race set before you, there are others competing at the same time, wanting to win the prize. That means they’re trying to defeat you utterly! It’s easy to begin to wonder, *“do I have what it takes?”*

Do you have what it takes? The answer is, *“yes and no.”* No, for *“who then can be saved?”* the disciples asked Jesus. *“With man this is impossible.”* You, of yourselves, don’t have what it takes! *“The journey is too great for you!”* The way is too hard. And curling up and dying won’t help, but you need help.

“With God all things are possible.” You see, it takes amazing grace to save wretches like us. Therefore, repent, saying, *“O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”* Where does your help come from? It comes from the Lord! *“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* *“Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!”* The writer to the Hebrews says, *“run with endurance ... **looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.**”* Jesus says in our Gospel, *“this is the will of my Father that that everyone who **looks on the Son** and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*

Yes, Jesus is our very present help in times of trouble. Therefore, Jesus Himself says, *“come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* And over and over in our Gospel, we hear Jesus speak of those who *“come to me.”* How does this even happen, for we know that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, or come to Him?

In fact, we know. It’s by God’s grace. Jesus says, *“All that **the Father gives me** will come to me.”* Again, He says, *“No one can come to me unless **the Father who sent me draws him.**”* In catechism language, we say, *“the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel; enlightened me with His gifts; sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”* That is, the Father gives His Spirit to us that we might know of Him who came down from heaven to do the Father’s will. The Spirit bears witness through the Gospel that the Father’s will was that the Son might become one with man that man might become one again with God—a gift from God of the new self put on in the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, the primordial perfection restored, *“created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”* The Father’s gift of the Spirit bears witness that the Father’s will and the Son’s will were one, and that will was that the Son might be

lifted up to endure the shame of the cross, earning for sinful man what only the God-man could: forgiveness and life and salvation, that mankind, covered in the Lord's righteousness, might be exalted with Him to "*the right hand of the throne of God.*"

It is the Father's will that we look to the Son and believe in Him, for Scripture says He "*desires that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.*" And so He sends His Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, to give us His grace, that we might believe. It is God's will that His grace be given through instruments — we call them the means of grace, the Gospel and His Sacraments. It's His will and command that water, included in His command and combined with His word, be poured over the heads of young and old, that disciples might be made. It's His will that this Sacrament of Initiation be remembered, that we might be led to daily repentance and renewed in zeal for living in righteousness and purity.

It's God's will that we should hear His word, ponder it, live by it. Yes, we must eat and drink for our physical well-being, but God fed the Israelites with manna—and He feeds you — "*that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*" And He tells pastors to preach this enduring word: "*repentance and the forgiveness of sins in His name.*"

And lest you think this is enough, the Lord reminds us, "*the journey is too great for you*"; "*the way is too hard*". Therefore, out of His abundant grace He says to you: eat and drink all along the way. Partake of Jesus, the Bread of Heaven. Eat "*the living bread that came down from heaven.*" Eat this bread given for "*the life of the world*" — eat His body and live. Drink from the fount that is Jesus, that "*spring of water welling up to eternal life.*" Drink of that ruddy water that flowed from His pierced side, and which He offers at the Holy Sacrament today. Drink of Him and never thirst.

Eat and drink and be strengthened for the great journey, the hard way that lies yet in front of you. For the journey set before you is longer than 21 days. The headwinds of the devil and crosswinds of the world buffet against you and want to get you to abandon the race. The heights you are scaling are greater than any Alpine or Pyrenean mountain of the Tour. So "*run the race with endurance.*" "*Run that you may obtain [the prize].*" But when "*you have finished the race,*" when you have been taken up to the heavenly places having "*kept the faith,*" remember to give thanks to God the Son for spanning the chasm between heaven and earth for you, to the God the Father for drawing you unto the Son, and to God the Spirit for enlightening you and keeping you, by eating and drinking heavenly food, in this one true faith. For the journey may be too great for you, but lo, He is with you always, even to the end of the age.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.