

(triumphant organ music) (organ music becomes more subdued and quizzical)

- Good morning, and welcome to this service of worship on the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, here in Duke Chapel. Our preacher today is the Reverend Debra Brazzel. She came to Duke Chapel this summer from Dallas, Texas and has already endeared herself to many in our community. She will be coordinating and leading the religious activities here on the Duke campus and we welcome her to the pulpit of Duke Chapel. We also thank Donna Sparks and the Duke Chapel Summer Choir. They have labored this summer and have blessed us richly in the ministry of music, and we thank them for the work that they have rendered in our services of worship throughout the summer. Now, let's stand and join together in the greeting. Come to the one who grants us eternal life, gathered in the name of Christ, who offers bread. (congregation replies in unison) Let us praise God and all people of faith, for God has richly blessed us in all things. (congregation replies in unison) God dawns on us like morning light, like sun flowing forth on a cloudless morning. (congregation replies in unison) (processional organ music plays) (chorus singing joins in with organ music) (choir stops as the organ music continues) (choir rejoins the organ playing) Grant, we beseech thee, merciful God, that thy church, being gathered together in the unity of the Holy Spirit may manifest thy power among all peoples, in the glory of thy name, through Jesus Christ, our Lord who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit. One God, now and forever. Amen; be seated.

- Let us pray. Prepare our hearts, O God, (congregation joins in) to accept your word, silence in us any voice but your own, that hearing, we may also obey your will. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. The old testament reading is taken from the second book of Samuel, the 23rd chapter, beginning at the first verse. Now, these are the last words of David. The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the strong one of Israel. The Spirit of the Lord speaks through me; God's word is upon my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel said to me: One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land. Is not my house like this with God? For God has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will God not cause to prosper all my help and all my desire? But the Godless are all like the thorns that are thrown away, for they cannot be picked up with the hand. To touch them, one uses an iron bar or the shaft of a spear; and they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God.

- Please stand and join in singing the psalter, Psalm 67, found on page 791 in the hymnal. (organ music begins Psalm 67) ♪ O God, be gracious to us and bless us ♪ ♪ And make your face to shine upon us ♪ ♪ That your way may be known upon Earth ♪ ♪ Your saving power among all nations ♪ ♪ Let the peoples praise you, O God, ♪ ♪ Let all the peoples praise you. ♪ ♪ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy ♪ ♪ For You judge the peoples with equity ♪ ♪ And guide the nations upon Earth ♪ ♪ Let the peoples praise You, O God ♪ ♪ Let all

the peoples praise you ♪ ♪ The earth has yielded its increase ♪ ♪ God, our God has blessed us ♪ ♪ God has blessed us ♪ ♪ Let all the ends of the Earth feel God ♪ ♪ O glory be to You, O God ♪ ♪ And to Jesus Christ, our savior ♪ ♪ And to the Holy Spirit, resting in He ♪ ♪ As it was, since time began, ♪ ♪ Is now and will be forever more ♪ You may be seated.

- The epistle reading this morning is taken from Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the sixth chapter, beginning at the first verse. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother. This is the first commandment with a promise so that it might be well with you and you may live long on the Earth. And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. (simple organ melody plays) (choir begins singing in Latin)

- The gospel text is taken from the sixth chapter of John, verses 55 through 69. Listen now, for the word of God. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which our ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever. He was teaching these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, this teaching is difficult, who can accept it? But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the son of man, ascending where he was before? It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh avails nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you, there are some who do not believe. For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones who did not believe him, and who was the one who would betray him. And he said, for this reason, I have told you that no one can come to me, unless it is granted by the Father. Because of this, many of his disciples turned back, and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the 12, do you also wish to go away? Simon Peter answered, Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Praise be to God.

- Those of you who've been here recently know that we've been studying the sixth chapter of John for about the past five weeks. In fact, last week I had someone say to me that they were getting a little full of bread sermons. The challenge that I face is being the last person to preach on this chapter. But the amazing thing I've found about scripture, is that though we've heard the stories so many times and sometimes we're tempted to tune them out, and though we've heard endless sermons preached on them, there is always something new, and God continues to speak to us through them. It is my prayer that each of us will receive something new this day, and will hear the word of God that we need to receive. Let me set the scene for you, once again. For to be understood, the sixth chapter of John needs to be heard as a whole. Jesus has speaking to crowds around the sea of Galilee for the past several days. Over five thousand have been abundantly fed with a few loaves and fishes. Jesus has walked on water to join his disciples on the sea as they crossed to Capernaum, baffling the crowd when they later found him, because they had seen his disciples leave without him. There begins, in Capernaum, a long dialogue between Jesus and the crowd

about eating and drinking and the demands of faith. Our scripture passage today picks up on the end of that dialogue. The crowd had sought Jesus because they had been fed. But Jesus was challenging them to look beyond temporal food, which perishes, to spiritual food, which nourishes one to eternal life. Jesus confronted his listeners with the demand to live for God rather than self, to put things of the spirit before things of the flesh, to make a choice between the bread of life and the manna, which perishes. And finally, Jesus has asked them to make a decision of faith. Will you believe and accept the demands of faith, or turn away? Will you leap or stumble? The crowd had been following Jesus for days yet when he confronted them with the demand to make a decision of faith, most of them turned away. They could not, or would not make the leap of faith. What caused them to stumble when they had sought Jesus so eagerly? Some of them couldn't get past their history, you see they knew Jesus as the son of Joseph and Mary. How could one whom they knew claim to speak for God? How could a carpenter, a Jew, a common man claim to hold the key to eternal life? At best, Jesus had to be a bit off his rocker and not realize what he was saying, and at worst, he knew full well what he was saying and was intentionally speaking blasphemy against God. Their own history, as well as Jesus' human history was a stumbling block they couldn't get beyond, so they turned away. The fact of Jesus' humanity, or incarnation, was also one of the major conflicts in the early Christian church. Gnosticism and Docetism were two movements in Christianity, which believe that matter is inherently evil, therefore God, who is purely spirit and purely good, could not become human, because flesh is evil. They believed that God might appear to take on human form, but that God would not, in actuality, take on human form. Therefore, they denied the incarnation of God in Christ. John wrote his gospel specifically to counter these heresies in the early Christian church, and he strongly emphasized the language of the incarnation throughout his gospel, with such language as, the word became flesh; my bread, the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh, and my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. John believed that the reality of God's incarnation in Christ was critical. God must have become fully human in order for us to be fully redeemed by his death and resurrection. John saw Jesus' human history as essential for our salvation, but it was a stumbling block to many of those who heard Jesus speak, and to many in the early church. On the other hand, some of those who followed Christ turned away in anger and disappointment because their expectations were not met. The Jews expected a messiah of the line of David who would restore Jewish lands and consolidate Jewish power. They expected a messiah who would lead them, once again, into a land flowing with milk and honey. When Jesus healed the sick, and fed the five thousand, they saw in him a man with tremendous personal and spiritual power. They hoped that he would be for them the worldly leader, who could galvanize Jewish resistance to the Roman empire and restore the glory of Israel. In fact, they planned to take him by force, to make him their king after he fed the five thousand, but he knew of their intentions and was able to get away from the crowd. Jesus tells them, the next day, in Capernaum that they were seeking him for the wrong reason. They were concerned with the material kingdom and political power, but he was confronting them with the demands of the in-breaking of God's kingdom and God's reign. Their expectations were not met, so they turned away in disappointment. Some who stumbled were swept up in the mob mentality. As long as the crowds were excited about what they were seeing and hearing, they went along to be part of the action. But when public sentiment turned against Jesus, they also turned away. Some of them may have even wanted to believe, but they didn't have the courage to go against the tide of public opinion. Many in the crowd in our story also stumbled because of language. They took Jesus literally when he said, I am the bread of life, and my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink, and they were highly offended by his language. Jewish law states that one shall eat no

unclean food, and a good Jew followed very stringent food guidelines, and kept themselves separate from persons of other cultures that they considered unclean. They saw only the surface value of Jesus' words and actions, and turned away from what they considered cannibalistic demands. But Jesus also said, I am the door. I am the light of the world. I am the true vine, I am the good shepard. Jesus often used parables and metaphors to point to deep spiritual truths, but many in the crowd couldn't get past the language, so they turned away in frustration. Some of those listening heard Jesus and understood his message all too well. They knew that their whole world was threatened. If Jesus was believed and followed, then it would cost them their worldly power, their comfortable existence, and their convenient, familiar God. And they weren't willing to pay that price. They turned away because the demands of faith were too great. When the crowd had drifted away, Jesus turned to the 12, looked them in the eyes and said, do you also wish to go away? They were being given one more opportunity to make this ultimate decision. Peter was the first to take the leap of faith, responding, Lord to whom shall we go? We have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God. Peter had felt the gracious leading of God confirming that Jesus spoke the truth. And though most of the crowd turned away and a promising movement seemed to be dying before his eyes, Peter could not turn away because God had hold of his heart. To turn away from Jesus would mean to turn away from God. The seeds of belief had been planted, and the knowledge that Jesus revealed God's presence, and God's will, and God's word were growing within him. When faced with the decision about whether to commit to Jesus all the way or turn away once and for all, Peter made the only response he could make, we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God, there is no other place we can go. God also confronts each of us with the demand to make a decision of faith. What will our response be when Christ asks, do you also wish to go away? It is so easy for us to turn away from Christ and there are so many reasons that we stumble. For some of us, as for those in Jesus' day, history is a stumbling block. We aren't really sure what to make of Jesus' human history, of the miracles and the story of the incarnation. It challenges our 20th century world view. We find it difficult sometimes to believe that Christ actually was born of a virgin, died and was resurrected after three days. Surely these are myths, meant to point to spiritual truths but with no actual basis in historical fact, or so some of the theologians tell us. And then there's been endless theological debate over the past 20 centuries as to the meaning of the stories about Jesus Christ. If the experts can't agree, then how are we expected to know the truth? So we take the stories of scripture with a grain of faith, and our faith is hindered by our reservation and skepticism. Others of us stumble because of our personal experiences. Perhaps we've been raised in families that didn't place much importance on faith, and therefore it's been peripheral in our own lives. On the other hand, some of us have lived in situations where the faith or religion of a family member was crammed down our throats at every opportunity, and we now find it hard to swallow. We've experienced religion as a weapon of manipulation, to control people and get them to obey whatever authority happens to be using it. And we turn away from belief for fear of being controlled by others. And many of us have been hurt by people who claim to be following Jesus' will. We've seen good Christians do monstrous things and scandals of religious leaders have repeatedly been splashed across our headlines. History is filled with accounts of horrendous deeds that have been done in the name of Christ. Many of us have stumbled because of a believer's sin or hypocrisy. And some of us, as the biblical hearers have stumbled over the language. We read scripture, but it has no meaning for us. We can't get beyond the linguistic, cultural and historic differences of the biblical writers. We are blocked, like many in the crowd, by a literal interpretation of Jesus' words and the inability to translate them into terms that make sense in the 20th century. Others of us have stumbled because our

expectations haven't been met. We've prayed again and again, for a job, for health, for peace of mind, for healing in our relationships, for directions in our lives. And many times it has seemed that we've prayed to a deaf God and the help that we've asked for has not been forthcoming, so we've turned away in anger and disappointment. Some of us have turned our backs on Christ because it's the popular, 20th century thing to do. Sure, we think churches are nice, social institutions, though somewhat antiquated. They're a nice place to have a sense of belonging, they help instill morals in our children, they make us feel better about doing a little something for others less fortunate than ourselves, but they're not really central to our lives. We tolerate faith and religion as long as it doesn't threaten the status quo or demand too much of us, as long as it doesn't interfere with the things we really want in life. We've been swept up in the mob mentality, and today's mob places materialistic values above all else. Some of us have understood Jesus' words and his call to a commitment of faith all too well. We know what is demanded but just can't make the commitment he asks for. If we take Jesus seriously, we know that our worldly power and our comfortable existence and our convenient and familiar God will be threatened. We've turned away because we're afraid of what an absolute commitment of faith will cost us. There are so many reasons why we stumble and turn away from Christ, it makes us wonder how anyone ever makes a decision of faith. But Jesus says, in the sixth chapter of John, all that the Father gives to me will come to me and whoever comes to me, I will not cast out. And later in the text he says, no one can come to me unless the Father draws them to me. And again, no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father. Faith, it seems, is not something we can accomplish on our own, but a gift given to us by God. It is God's will that each of us be drawn to Christ and take the leap of faith and believe, but it's not something that we have to accomplish on our own. God has taken the initiative to reach out to us again and again and again. Peter felt God's gracious leading, confirming within him that Jesus spoke the truth, that Jesus was indeed the son of God, who had the power to reveal to God and the power to overcome every stumbling block. God desires to draw us to Christ, if we would but allow ourselves to be led. As we turn toward Christ, the seeds of faith can be planted in our hearts, and grow there until we are enabled, by God's grace to make the leap of faith. Once the seeds of faith are planted, God can overcome our doubts, our past experiences, our fears, our disappointment, our hurt, our anger. Every stumbling block to faith can be overcome by God, and God plants within us the sure knowledge and the leading of God's direction. It is God's will that we come to know Jesus as the Holy One of God, for once we know this, then we become open to divine instruction. Then we are enabled to feed on Christ in our heart and to feed on Christ is to absorb his teaching, his mind, his ways, his life, his character, so that his mind becomes our mind, and his ways become our ways. His power passes to us and becomes our power and every stumbling block to faith is overcome. God draws us to Christ and gives us faith so that we might abide in Christ, and he in us. We are given a hunger and a thirst for what Christ has to offer, and it is God's will to give us to Christ so that we might inherit and appropriate everything that Christ is, both what he is and what he teaches. What Jesus offers keeps and sustains us in life, enabling us to do and be all that we are meant to do and be, enabling us to enjoy eternal life, both now and forever. What will we say when we are asked to make the ultimate decision of faith? What will we say when Jesus asks us, do you also wish to go away? Let us be drawn with Peter by God's gracious leading, to take the leap of faith as we respond, Lord, to whom shall we go? We have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God. Thanks be to God, amen. (uplifting organ music plays) (congregation and choir begin singing)

- The Lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- Let us pray, be seated. O, loving God, in whom we live and move and have our being, where would we go for the words of life, if not to you? What hope would there be but assuaging our deepest hungers, soothing our greatest pain, were it not for you? Therefore we pray, for brothers and sisters across the world who, this day, find themselves in circumstances of fear, uncertainties, civil unrest, or war. Particularly do we pray for the peoples of the Soviet Union. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We pray for the Church, spread across the world, gathering this day in a million different places, praising and praying in a multitude of voices. Your body, offered for the world. Strengthen your church, O Lord. Give her a bold voice, active hands, and a warm and open heart. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We pray for families beset today with new challenges, terrible difficulties, great joys and simple gifts. For all who tried to be good parents and faithful children. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We pray for students returning to school, full of bright, fresh hope and fear and anxiety. Give them grace to overcome their fears and to use their gifts. Encourage them, we pray, on the path of wisdom. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We pray for any who have come to this service today burdened by some secret need, which only you can know, or those who are looking for the courage to believe your difficult words, or for those who are listening for their name to be called by a loving God, or those who are yearning for a healing touch. Lord, giver of life and bread, in your mercy, hear our prayer. These, and other spoken and unspoken requests, we lay before your merciful grace, amen. As a forgiven and reconciled people, let us now offer ourselves and our gifts to the God who has offered so much. (organ music plays) (choir singing) Gracious Lord, we thank you for the gift of your word, which at times challenges us, and at other times comforts us. We thank you for your grace that enables even unfaithful people to be faithful, enables even those of us who lack courage, to have courage to follow your way. We thank you for the blessings of summer days, and families, and music well sung, and all the other gifts by which you strengthen our faith and enrich our lives. We acknowledge all of this as a gift from thee, and therefore we offer our gifts back to you for you work. Praying as our Lord has taught us, (congregation joins in prayer) our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, the glory. Forever and ever, amen. Now, may the grace of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. (choir begins singing) (organ music begins) (congregation singing, 'Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee')