

Sermon for 8-19-18
Gospel: John 6:51-58
The Rev. Maggie Leidheiser-Stoddard
Christ Episcopal Church, Springfield OH

Here we are -- week four of the Bread of Life! One more to go... and yes, I'm having fun. I love this sixth chapter of John because it paints a picture of the glorious, abundant, overflowing banquet of joy that is feasting on our Lord.

But there's one verse in today's Gospel reading that troubles me -- verse 53: "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." This verse troubles me because it doesn't sound like the Jesus I know, the Savior and Redeemer who humbles himself and gives his life for the whole world, the Christ who comforts and loves more abundantly than any of us can even imagine.

At least on first listen, it sounds like Jesus is saying that anyone who doesn't share in the sacrament of Holy Communion is somehow dead inside. After all, we are Episcopalians, and it's within the context of the Eucharist that we consume "the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven" and "the Blood of Christ, the Cup of Salvation" every single Sunday (and sometimes on Wednesdays, and other holy days as appointed). And we know that there is life and blessing and a taste of heaven in the Eucharist; that's why we return to the altar again and again. So we are predisposed to hear the words of verse 53 - "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" - in this particular way: 'unless you consume the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, you are dead inside.'

Well, I have a few questions about that....

- How many times does a person have to eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood to have life within them? Is once enough, or do you have to receive every Sunday?
- Does it matter where you eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood, what kind of church you're in, what kind of priest or pastor or minister is presiding over the sacrament?
- Does it matter what kind of bread is being used? Does it matter if it's wine or grape juice that's being consecrated?
- Does it matter if you've been baptized before receiving? Does it matter whether you understand the holy mystery of the sacrament or not?
- And what about all those who do not celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, and those who've never heard of or encountered it? Our fellow Christians in the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends (that's the Quakers to most of us) don't 'do' communion, ever. And of course our family members, friends, and neighbors of other faiths and no faith at all aren't receiving the sacrament -- so are they all somehow dead inside? That's an awful lot of people -- people made in the image of God, just like you and me -- who "have no life in [them]."

These are uncomfortable questions, I know; but if we want to get to the bottom of this, we must ask them. What is Jesus really telling us here?

Let's take a step back, together.

This is the Gospel according to John, and we know that in John's Gospel, nothing is ever simple or straightforward. We also know, as Deacon Rick told us in his sermon last week, that there is no institution narrative in John. There is a Last Supper -- Jesus eats the Passover meal with his disciples -- but he doesn't break bread and share wine with them, telling them 'This is my body, this is my blood' and commanding them to do this in remembrance of him. Instead, in John's Last Supper,

Jesus washes their feet, and tells them that they should do for others as he has done for them.ⁱ

And let's not forget where we are in John's Gospel this morning. Today's verses are from the second half of chapter 6. We're smack dab in the middle, right in the heart of Christ's ministry. The Passover Meal with foot-washing doesn't come until chapter 13. So why would Jesus make an explicit reference to communion here in chapter 6 when his Last Supper with his friends is still 7 chapters away?

Perhaps, friends, the answer is that **Jesus is not talking about the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist**. Or, more accurately, Jesus is not talking **only** about the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist. We Episcopalians, and other Christians who celebrate the Eucharist weekly, are inclined to assume that Jesus is talking about Holy Communion here; but, as my dad loves to say, *you know what happens when you assume...*

Christ's teachings about eating his flesh and drinking his blood in John chapter 6 are enormously significant for how we understand the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist, but that doesn't mean he's talking specifically about the Sacrament. Episcopal priest and theologian Colin Brown puts it this way: "John 6 is not about the Lord's Supper; rather, the Lord's Supper is about what is described in John 6."ⁱⁱ

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Okay, so then the natural question becomes - what *is* described in John 6?

Let's look at some different translations. The King James Bible, the New International Version, and the New Revised Standard Version (the one we use in worship) all sound pretty similar, but there are surprises in some of the newer versions.

From the NTE, *The New Testament for Everyone*: "Anyone who feasts upon my flesh and drinks my blood has the life of God's coming age ...

My flesh is true food, you see, and my blood is true drink. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I remain in them."ⁱⁱⁱ

From *The Voice* translation: "The bread that I will give breathes life into the cosmos. This bread is my flesh... My flesh and blood provide true nourishment."^{iv}

And from Eugene Peterson's popular paraphrase, *The Message*: "The Bread that I present to the world so that it can eat and live is myself, this flesh-and-blood self... By eating my flesh and drinking my blood you enter into me and I into you. In the same way that the fully alive Father sent me here and I live because of him, so the one who makes a meal of me lives because of me."^v

"feasting" on "true food and true drink"

"remaining in Christ"

"Breathing life into the cosmos"

"true nourishment"

"Flesh-and-blood self"

"fully alive"

Language like this, can it help us understand?

This is John, so **incarnation** is important, physical reality, lived experience, bodies and life and breath and flesh and blood -- "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."^{vi}

The Word, *logos*, is God, is Christ, is life; and it became flesh and lived among us. This is real life, deep life, full life, **Christ** life we're talking about here. Jesus gives his all, his flesh and blood, for us -- through his incarnation, through his life and ministry, through his death on the cross.^{vii} If we dwell in him, if we abide in him, if we drench our flesh-and-blood selves in his overflowing abundance, if we bask in the fullness of Christ, then we will know what it is to be fully alive in body and in spirit.

Feeding on the Word-made-flesh, the Bread from heaven, abiding in holiness and love and light is the eternal banquet for our souls that satisfies every hunger and quenches every thirst. The sacraments are one way of dwelling in Christ, abiding in him, immersing ourselves in him; but we know they're not the only way.

We feed on the fullness of Christ when we immerse ourselves in his teachings in Scripture; when we come before him in prayer and meditation, when we worship and glorify him in song, when we lay aside selfish ways and love our neighbors as he commanded us, when we bask in the beautiful majesty of Creation, when we submit ourselves to God's will, when we humble ourselves and share our abundant blessings, when we delight in thanksgiving and praise and seek to recognize his face in every person we encounter... there are many ways to feast on Christ, and they all bring us closer to the full potential of holiness within and around us. And if we restrict ourselves, if we focus entirely on one way, then we're missing out on the fullness of the banquet, and the potential for new life within us.

Feasting on Christ opens our minds and awakens our souls to a deeper and fuller and truer knowledge of God, and all that God has done and continues to do. May our hearts and minds stay focused and our appetites stay strong, as we feast on what God has provided -- the great banquet of life in Jesus Christ.

ⁱ John 13:1-17 *NRSV*

ⁱⁱ from *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*

ⁱⁱⁱ John 6:54-56 *NTE*

^{iv} John 6:51, 55 *VOICE*

^v John 6:51, 54-57 *MSG*

^{vi} John 1:1-4, 14 *NRSV*

^{vii} from Alma Tinoco Ruiz at www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/august-19-ordinary-20b-john-651-58