

Sermon August 18, 2024

John 6:51-58

This is the conclusion of Jesus' teachings on the Bread of Heaven. Once again, there is a literal interpretation by the hearers of Jesus' words that cause misunderstandings. Throughout John's Gospel, beginning with Nicodemus in chapter 3 and the woman at the well in chapter 4, Jesus clearly uses metaphors to explain the reign of God and how we might participate in it as well as finding what we need in it, and time and again, the people take his words literally and misunderstand. Today we interpret this passage as the bread and wine of Communion, the meal of remembrance; however, in John's Gospel, "the word became flesh" introduces us to the idea that God's law, the Word, is embodied in Jesus; therefore, we are to fully embrace, envelope and model the life of Christ in our own life. We are to eat his flesh and drink his blood—in other words, take on the flesh and blood of Christ, to live the life of Christ to others in this world, laying down our lives for others and sharing God's love with all who seek God. We must become the living Word, the Light of the World. The Message (MSG)

"I'm telling you the most solemn and sober truth now: Whoever believes in me has real life, eternal life. I am the Bread of Life. Your ancestors ate the manna bread in the desert and died. But now here is Bread that truly comes down out of heaven. Anyone eating this Bread will not die, ever. I am the Bread—living Bread!—who came down out of heaven. Anyone who eats this Bread will live—and forever! The Bread that I present to the world so that it can eat and live is myself, this flesh-and-blood self."

At this, the Jews started fighting among themselves: "How can this man serve up his flesh for a meal?"

But Jesus didn't give an inch. "Only insofar as you eat and drink flesh and blood, the flesh and blood of the Son of Man, do you have life within you. The one who brings a hearty appetite to this eating and drinking has eternal

life and will be fit and ready for the Final Day. My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. 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. This is the Bread from heaven. Your ancestors ate bread and later died. Whoever eats this Bread will live always."

Proverbs 9:1-6

Invited to dine at wisdom's feast

Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars.

She has slaughtered her animals; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table.

She has sent out her female servants; she calls from the highest places in the town,

"You who are simple, turn in here!" To those without sense she says,

"Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight."

Abundant Life

Recently, I went to visit my Godmother in Virginia. She has a lovely house overlooking the Bay. Martie and I spent a perfect evening sitting on her deck, sipping wine and eating bread and cheese. We talked about her grieving process in the years since her husband died... she feels stronger and more at peace than I have seen in a long time! We talked about some of the transitions in my life over the past year... we talked about our hopes for Meg. "Look how far we've all come," she said with a smile. We talked and sipped and talked and ate... and looking back, I realize that we were also served a big serving of wisdom that night.

*'Come, eat of my bread (Wisdom calls out today)
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.'*

Hundreds of years later, Jesus prepared meals of bread, wine and Wisdom. With every serving, people were fed, even if they didn't realize it. The food gave their bodies strength, but it was the Wisdom that sustained them as they faced the difficulties of discipleship. Jesus taught them that sometimes we have to face the difficulties head on before we can feel hope or experience change.

The Earliest Christians certainly understood that. They never had an easy message to share, and many of them did not have the memories of sitting at Jesus' table. There they were, in the aftermath of the resurrection with a complicated, un-provable message to share. Jesus, this poor carpenter from Nazareth, the son of Joseph is also, somehow, the Son of God. Jesus, God's son, sent to bring us a message of God's new reign and yet every known religious leader rejected his words and his ministry... said he was a fraud. A tough message to share – and it gets tougher.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he writes that the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews and nonsense to the Gentiles. The message of the cross was hard to overcome. The cross was an instrument of torture and death. Jesus, the Son of God, tortured and humiliated and killed by the Roman Empire. That doesn't make sense. And if you look in Deuteronomy, one of the oldest books in the Bible, it says that anyone who is hung upon a tree is cursed. So in the cross, God chooses to be human, chooses to allow pain and torture, chooses to be cursed.

And then there are Jesus' words themselves, as told by John. Listen again to what our reading said:

My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. By eating my flesh and drinking my blood you enter into me and I into you.

Yuck! No wonder people accused early Christians of being cannibals. Think of how shocked people would be, if they didn't have 2000 years of Communion experiences passed down by our ancestors to go by. Eating his flesh and drinking his blood? It would be like having a chalice filled with blood at our next communion service.

Who wants to be a part of that?

We do. That's why we're here. As difficult as these messages are, the message was sent by God and it stuck. People decided to believe this improbable, un-provable man we call Jesus, Son of God, Savior, Christ.

We believe.

... but sometimes it is so hard to act on our beliefs. Love God with your whole being. Love your neighbor... love your enemy... live into radical, extravagant hospitality. God calls us to put our beliefs into action... to show whose we are in everything we do... with everyone we meet. And how do we live into our faith?

- ∞ We seek reconciliation, when others seek revenge.
- ∞ We lift up the powerless, when others grab power.
- ∞ We long for forgiveness, when others dwell in anger.

Stay awake, Jesus tells us, and get ready for new life. Be ready to share the good news of God's love in everything we do and everything we say. To be servants of Christ, filled with the Spirit.

We are reminded that God inspires and moves in us, but we need to stay close to God by living lives that model Jesus' example connected flesh to flesh, blood to blood.

When we follow Christ, we are called to seek the well-being of others, to love our neighbors, to lift up the poor, to live in peace with others and be ready to share God's love through the power of the Spirit.

Children of God... flesh to flesh, blood to blood, connected to Christ forever...
Look at us!

Look at where we have come from and where we can go. Look at the daily miracles of prayers heard and hopes realized. Look at the opportunities of reconciliation that stretch before us, if only we are willing to take that first step. A step in the path that Jesus laid before us.

The truth of our faith is much more simple than we make it sound, so hear now another serving of Wisdom:

God so loves the world that God poured and continues to pour out God's very life, very self, for our sake -- not because we are so good, but because we are hungry and thirsty and dying. God made us to share God's wholeness, love, and eternal life. That pouring out of God's self for us is revealed in Jesus the Christ crucified, a moment not cursed but blessed by God. The blessings continue to pour down... a continual, never-ending expression of who God is.

God poured out God's self in Creation, God poured out God's self on the cross and in the tomb. And God continues to pour out God's self for us in the call of the Spirit. God pours down on us like rain in the love we experience in the Body of Christ together. Somehow, in a way we can never fully comprehend, in the breaking of the bread, lives are transformed in the image of a loving God.

Praise be to God, Amen!