

Message for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (8/15/2021)
John 6:51-58

I wonder if the lectionary committee should have included another two verses at the end of our Gospel from John today. If they had, then in verse 60 we would have heard the disciples' reaction to Jesus' words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. "This teaching is difficult," they murmur to each other. "Who can accept it?"

I can understand their bewilderment.

Today marks the fourth consecutive Sunday that we've heard Jesus teach about the bread of life, the true bread from heaven, the food that endures for eternal life. And so far, it's all well and good. We know what it is to eat bread, and maybe we can begin to imagine what it means that Jesus is heavenly bread. But, to feed on his flesh and blood? That's a shock to our sensibilities.¹ It evokes images of cannibalism, for goodness' sake. So, if you're feeling a little squeamish, you're not alone. More than one preacher has admitted to sidestepping this Gospel out of sheer discomfort and preaching instead about something less graphic, less offensive.

Still, I can't help but think that **Jesus has a reason for saying what he says the way he says it. When he specifies that the bread he has to offer "for the life of the world" is his flesh, he intends to get everyone's attention.**

¹ Adele Stiles Resmer,
members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=8&d8d=16&d8y=2015&atom_id=9817.

“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” the people wonder. It’s an especially objectionable image when we consider that Jesus is teaching in a Jewish context, and Levitical law expressly forbids observant Jews from drinking the blood of a slaughtered animal,² let alone a human being. Nevertheless, with the people already on edge, Jesus doubles down: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

But, it’s not just for shock value. If Jesus’ purpose is to feed a hungry world for the sake of abundant life,³ then these words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood must be good news. **The meal that Jesus so vividly describes is a key element of the incarnation itself, the wonder that God enters into bodily life in solidarity with a world that hungers for God. And, if Jesus – the word, the wisdom, the love of God in flesh and blood – offers himself to us as food, then we’re nourished with God’s own life.**⁴

When I hear this teaching, I’m reminded of the old aphorism, “you are what you eat.” The prevailing wisdom is that your life is shaped in one way or another by what you consume. Whatever you take in will run in your veins, influencing your state of being, your attitudes, and your actions. And, according to our Gospel, to eat the flesh and blood of Jesus is to eat healthy: “Whoever eats me will live because of me.” **When we ingest Jesus, when we allow him to fill us, we**

² William H. Willimon, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 359.

³ John 10:10.

⁴ Gail Ramshaw,

members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=8&d8d=16&d8y=2015&atom_id=9784.

thrive on his grace and truth,⁵ and in that way we become grace and truth for others. You are what you eat.

But, the fact of the matter is that Jesus is not our first choice on the menu. We tend to keep him at arm's length,⁶ like a decorative feature at a meal where we feast instead on wealth, social esteem, partisan pride, nationalism, entertainment, drugs and alcohol – any of the tasty morsels that we're convinced will satisfy our deepest hungers. And once we get our fill, our lives amount to the value of our assets, or the approval we expect from others, or the certainty of our worldview, or the numbness of our self-medication. You are what you eat.

The promise at the heart of the gospel is that **a nourishing meal always awaits us. “My flesh is true food,” Jesus insists, “and my blood is true drink.” He’s not content to be kept at a distance, but insists on giving and pouring himself out as our main course. And as such, Jesus is food that forms us, food that becomes “part of [our] essence”⁷: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” You are what you eat.**

William Willimon puts it this way:

There is no knowing who the Christ is without visceral, total engagement. We will not be able to comprehend him by sitting back, comfortable in the pew, and coolly considering him as if he were an abstract, disembodied idea. Incarnation means that we must get up, come forward, hold out empty hands, sip wine, [and] chew bread....⁸

⁵ John 1:14.

⁶ Resmer.

⁷ Resmer quoting Robert Kysar.

⁸ *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 359.

Jesus intends to have all of us, body and soul. His truth wants to burrow deep within us, to consume us as we consume him ...to nourish every nook and cranny of our being.⁹

Friends, our faith is the receiving end of a feast, a spread of grace that God sets out for us in the midst of other, less satisfying options. Christ is true food and drink, and you are what you eat. So come, eat, drink, and live!

⁹ Ibid. 361.