

## Sermon for Sunday, August 19, 2012 John 6:51-58

Perhaps you thought you were done with the whole “I am the bread of life” thing, after a couple of sermons on that curious phrase.

Wrong.

Jesus is once again using this language in today’s passage from the Gospel of John. He said it before, several times, in fact, in hopes that the people to whom he was speaking would grab that metaphor and finally understand what he was trying to explain to them. He thought that talking about that most basic and necessary of foods, bread, would give them an idea of how knowing and believing in him as the Son of God would feed their souls and repair their broken relationship with their Creator.

But they didn’t quite understand, and in their confusion they began to get as frustrated as he seemed to be, and began to push him away. To them, what he said made no sense. Was he offering his own body as food? This was anathema to the Jews, for whom laws about food purity were very complicated and strict. Human flesh was not kosher.

So they knew that cannibalism could not possibly be what he was offering. What could he mean?

Remember how we talked last week about what their hopes and expectations were? How they wanted a king who would conquer the Roman oppressors? And how they thought this Jesus, who could do such amazing miracles and who talked so powerfully about a Creator who loved them and who sent him to teach them about the Creator?

It was hard for them to imagine such a benevolent Creator, given how difficult their lives were. Some of them may have remained faithful. Some of them may have felt that God had abandoned them. And now, once again their hopes were teetering on the edge of being dashed because this Jesus, this son of Joseph down the block, was talking all this crazy talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

What were they to do with this? What are WE to do with this?

Let’s hear that phrase that is so problematic with a different emphasis: “Those who eat MY flesh and drink MY blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for MY flesh is true food and MY blood is true drink... THIS is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats THIS bread will live forever.”

He was pointing them at the fact that what he was presenting to them was very, very different from the bread with which they were familiar. It was not bread from their kitchen. It was not even the manna which God had given the people of Israel as they wandered in the desert. And when Jesus was talking about offering them himself as the bread of life through his flesh and his blood, he was saying that his flesh and his blood was something very different. In the words of Martin Luther, it was the word “my” that defined what the word “flesh” meant, not the other way around. “My flesh” - flesh that was Jesus’ flesh was unlike any other kind of flesh, either human or animal. “My blood” – blood

that was Jesus' blood was unlike any other kind of blood. It was something extraordinarily different. In telling them in John's story that he was giving them his flesh and blood to consume, he was challenging them to see how utterly different he was from anyone and anything they had ever experienced. So consuming him was not cannibalism, it was taking something into themselves so that they could finally figure out who he was and what he was there for.

They were to take him into themselves, to use the words of one of my favorite prayers, to inwardly digest him to feel that ineffable connection with the Divine Spirit.

And isn't this what we hope for when we come to the communion rail each Sunday, to eat that flesh and drink that blood in the form of bread and wine, seeking an ineffable connection with our God? The priest and author Lauren Winner in her recent book "Still: Notes on a MidLife Faith Crisis," talks about a moment at the altar rail in a small church in upstate New York.

At the Eucharist, serving as a chalice bearer, she follows along behind the priest, offering the cup of wine to parishioner after parishioner. "Some clasp the cup and Guzzle with what looks like relish; some are daintier, more polite, as though handling fine crystal," and some practice intinction, dipping the wafer into the wine and then consuming "the crimsoned host." Later, talking with the priest, she learns something about those who came to kneel—particularly about an elderly couple who seemed "fragile as mushrooms." She learns "he has been afflicted by a wasting disease, an intestinal disease that makes it almost impossible for him to eat—he lives on Ensure and lemonade." Before, she had only observed that the elderly man and his wife each took a wafer when they were offered them. The wife proceeded to dip hers into the chalice and then eat it. The husband likewise dipped his in, but then handed the round of Christ's Body to his wife, who ate it for him. Winner writes: "There at the Communion rail, I don't yet know what illness lies behind this gesture, I know only the couple's hands and mouths, and that I am seeing one flesh. I have read about this, heard sermons about a man and a woman becoming one flesh; and here at the altar, I see that perhaps this is the way I come to know such intimacy myself: as part of the body of Christ, this body that numbers among its cells and sinews an octogenarian husband and wife who are Communion."

Like the elderly couple in Winner's story, we all come to the rail seeking a connection with God. We pray, we argue with God, we turn our backs on him sometimes, and yet we somehow find the courage to wander back up the aisle, up to the rail, needing to be fed, needing to feel the connection, needing some food that we can feel in our bellies as well as our souls. Our bodies may fail. Our abilities to digest that which Jesus offers us may be compromised, but our desire for it does not lessen. This is Jesus' message, what he feels compelled to say when he repeats that phrase "I am the bread of life," until we are sick of hearing it. There is one sure way to know him, to feel him so deeply a part of us that his love radiates in every cell of our being. This is what we seek when we come to the rail, in all our imperfection and human brokenness, to take in a piece of perfection that in turn perfects us.

Come to the altar rail. Take the bread and wine, his body and blood, that he offers us as the ultimate gift. Accept it, digest it as well as you can. Know that there is no gift more precious, no food more nourishing than God's love, and that the sustenance we receive from it lasts beyond any meal we could eat. Eat his flesh. Drink his blood. Be fed and be saved. Amen.