

sermon-8/23/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“We Are What We Eat”  
John 6:56-69

First, let's get at the troublesome parts of this passage so they don't distract us from what is more relevant for us in our day. When I say troublesome parts, I am referring to all the talk in John six about eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. The way John states it is rather off-putting.

It is not as hard for us to hear such graphic language as it was for Jews in the first century. We Christians automatically think communion when we hear talk of eating flesh and drinking blood. We see those words as symbolic and hardly bat an eye. “This is my body broken for you. Whenever you eat it, remember me.” “This is my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink ye all of it.”

Try to put yourself in the shoes of the disciples hearing this language for the first time. Remember, Jesus spoke these words in a synagogue. This was the place where scriptures such as Leviticus 17:10-14 were read. In that passage we read things like, “If anyone of the house of Israel. . .eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people.”

Leviticus was talking about eating the blood of an animal along with that animal's flesh. It goes without saying that eating a human's flesh and drinking his blood was beyond the pale.

We don't get how offensive the language is when we read it in the English translation. The Greek word translated “eat” is quite shocking. It is more literally translated “gnaw on” like a dog with a bone, or “munch” as if we were snacking on Jesus' flesh. That is what Jesus' audience would have heard.

The NRSV, in 6:60, does not capture how disgusted those early listeners were. It reads, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” The NEB translation is better. “This is more than we can stomach. Why listen to such talk?” The Jerusalem Bible is nice as well. “This is intolerable language.” It truly is not easy to read when we put ourselves in their shoes.

John tells us many turned back at this time and stopped following Jesus. Many scholars think John was speaking to his church in the late first century when he tells this story. Many in his church were leaving the faith, turning their backs on Jesus as it were, because of persecution. He was hoping those tempted to leave would hear Peter's response to Jesus' question. Jesus asked if the inner circle, the twelve, would go away as well.

Peter says, in essence, “I know this talk about eating flesh and drinking blood, along with some of the other things you have said, is troubling. But, where can we go? It is with

you where our lives begin to make sense, where our pulse quickens, where we encounter all that is Holy in life. You have the words of eternal life.”

What was Peter seeing in Jesus that caused him to stay? What do we see in Jesus that would cause us to try and be his disciple today? Let’s try and get underneath Jesus’ troubling image with its cannibalistic undertones to see the life he is asking us to lead.

First, we need to remember the gospel of John does not include what we call communion in his recounting of the Last Supper Jesus had with his disciples on the night of his arrest. Instead John tells us about Jesus washing his disciples feet. We have to turn to the Synoptic Gospels, to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, to read about any communion element in the Last Supper.

Thus, this passage in chapter six is the context out of which John wants us to understand communion. Some of the reading I have been doing this past week has opened me to a new way of seeing John’s perspective. One commentator in particular has shown how communion talk in John is far removed from the Last Supper and Jesus’ looming death on the cross.

John wants us to see communion, unlike in the other gospels where it is connected with Jesus’ sacrificial death, more in terms of Jesus’ life and the life he brings to us. This insight opens up a whole new way to appreciate this meaningful sacrament.

In this passage Jesus is talking about his relationship with God. That relationship is life-giving. Jesus abides with God in a very intimate way. He says, when we abide in him, when we enter intimately into his life, we enter into a deep relationship with God as well. The shocking language about eating his flesh and drinking his blood push the disciples into realizing how radical is this intimate abiding Jesus is urging. It is as if Jesus is telling his disciples, you are what you eat!

To eat Jesus’ flesh is to be nurtured by his words, the bread of life. Jesus is connecting the bread he offers in his life and words with the manna the Israelites were given in the wilderness in the Exodus. Those poor Israelites were on the road to freedom. That road was very difficult. They were starving for nourishment. God reached out to feed them providing that strange food, manna. But, the manna they ate was only temporary nourishment. Those Israelites eventually died.

Jesus is saying to his disciples (and to us), I know the road to freedom is never an easy road to travel. Life is very much like a wilderness journey full of dangers and temptations, bewilderment and heartache. But, when we abide in him, we will be nourished. And the nourishment God provides in Jesus is not just some temporary help.

Jesus says those who eat the bread of life he is offering will live forever. Scholars remind us he is not talking about immortality. We are all going to die. He is referring to a quality of life we call eternal life, where fear does not get the upper hand no matter how tough life gets. This is a life where not even death has the last word.

At the heart of John's gospel is a strong belief in incarnational theology. John truly believes that God's presence is experienced in the flesh of our lives. It is most clearly fleshed out in Jesus, but it is also fleshed out in less perfect ways as we attempt to follow him. When we love each other, God's love becomes real. When adults sacrifice in the present for the sake of the next generation, God's sacrificial love is glimpsed. When we commit to ecological practices, treating all creation as a vessel that holds the sacred, God's all encompassing presence peeks through even the most mundane parts of nature.

One commentator says incarnational theology invites us to see the world as a place to meet God. All of life is a potential bearer of the Holy. When we accept that, we live in very different ways. We end up valuing the creation as a gift and not just as material to be consumed. Priorities get shifted. Assumptions get challenged.

Jesus warns that if you abide in him, accept the bread he is offering, and then act from that perspective, it may ruffle some feathers. As we know that is what happened in Jesus' life. He threatened those who were in power by challenging their assumptions. They were afraid of losing their power and wealth, so they killed him.

I suspect that is what led many in John's church to stop following Jesus. Sure, the words about eating flesh and drinking blood were hard to stomach. But harder yet was the consequences that followed when one took discipleship seriously.

Where does that leave us? I don't think it would take much persuading to say that life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century feels like a wilderness where nourishment is hard to find. One could point to our crazy economy. Even more troubling is our seemingly broken political system. We have politicians who can't seem to get much done because they are beholden to special interests who fund their campaigns. We have others who play on our fears in order to control us.

From the health care reform stalemate, to the endless war in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the greed of some that has almost bankrupted our economy, we need no convincing we live in a wilderness. We may not be dying of thirst or hunger, but our wilderness has its own dangers and predatory animals so to speak.

We are in need of real nourishment. We are in need of the bread of life that connects us to God in deep ways. Sure, it is not easy to be a disciple of Jesus if we take that seriously. Sure, some of what Jesus says in the Bible offends us partly because it cuts pretty close to home, disclosing our prejudices and self-centeredness. But, as Peter said long ago, "Where else can we go?" Jesus has the words of eternal life. When we abide in him and let his words become bread for us, those words open up a quality of life that helps us deal with our fears. That bread can also give us strength to act with courage and integrity. Sign me up. Amen