

### John 6: 56-69 Flesh and Spirit, Beyond Metaphor

56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This 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.’ 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’ 61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, ‘Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But among you there are some who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65And he said, ‘For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.’

66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ 68Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’

What would you say your comfort level is with this passage, particularly with Jesus’ talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Just a warning. We are going to get weird in the sermon this morning; if we stick to the Bible, we can’t avoid getting weird and uncomfortable. We are going beyond the metaphor of how the church is the “body of Christ” in the world and as such how what we do ought to be life-giving.

If you noticed, we’ve been hearing about Jesus being the living bread that came down from heaven for the last 3 weeks. Jesus started out with the emphasis on “came down from heaven” and the folks listening to him were perturbed, because they knew Jesus’ family and where he came from. What is he talking about?

Then last week, Jesus introduced the image that the bread that Jesus gives for the life of the world is his flesh. And today, Jesus pushes the envelope further and says, eating his flesh and drinking his blood is the way to having the eternal life, and that the spirit is what gives life, for flesh by itself is useless.

Jesus knew many people would be turned off by this, for various reasons and you would have yours. He could have used a more palatable metaphor, couldn’t he, so people who had been following him would continue to follow? But, no, he carefully and relentlessly presents this

expression to the crowds and to the disciples. “Flesh and Blood, infused with the Spirit” is beyond metaphor; it is how the eternal life comes to us.

I often refer to the Gospel writers as our guide on the journey through the liturgical year that follows the life events and ministry of Jesus. Year A is Matthew, Year B is Mark, which is where we are now, and Year C is Luke. The Gospel of John doesn't get a lectionary year of its own, but the passages from John come up at critical junctures throughout the year with important messages about who Jesus is in relationship to God, and who we are in relationship with Jesus and God; and this relationship is everything.

So, 4 Sundays ago, when we got to the story of the feeding of the multitude in the Gospel of Mark, the lectionary switched to the story in John's Gospel, and we've been hearing about “bread” since. Just like God heard the cries of the people in the wilderness and gave them the food from heaven, Jesus fed the huge crowd with the bread. The Israelites who were given the heavenly bread of manna soon got tired of it and they complained they missed the meat. And that is the background to today's rather obscure, even disturbing talk by Jesus about eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

When we hear about Jesus's body given for us and his blood shed for us, almost immediately the Lord's Supper comes to our mind. In this congregation, I love that for the bread, we use loaves lovingly baked by Sigie or Doug or Dee. And for the cup, we use a pretty silver chalice and a pitcher and fill those dainty glass communion cups with grape juice. We do this not so much as to cover-up the potentially gruesome image of eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood, but to honor the precious and sacred nature of the Lord's Supper, and sets the table with care to communicate God's grace the table represents.

But this is not what John the Gospel writer had in mind. The Lord's Supper where Jesus breaks the bread and give it to the disciples saying, take, eat, this is my body given for you is in all three synoptic Gospels but not in John's Gospel. In fact, John has Jesus talk about eating his “flesh,” *sarx*, a different Greek word rather than the word for the “body” of the Lord's supper.

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus' action of breaking bread at the last supper he would have with his disciples was to comfort the disciples, promising his continued presence in the bread and the cup they would share in remembrance of him after his body is no longer with them.

Here in John, Jesus' words that whoever eats him would live because of him disturb and offend those who hear them.

First, in the passage that comes before today's, the passage we heard last Sunday, the crowd, whom Jesus had fed with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, those who had pursued Jesus because Jesus gave them food to eat, grumble among themselves saying, "how can this man give us his flesh to eat?" They remembered Moses who gave them the food from heaven, manna, in the wilderness, but Jesus is now saying he is the bread that came from heaven. He is claiming to be of God, but they know where he's from; they know his family; he can't have come from God. They had hungrily eaten the bread Jesus had given them in the field, but they could not swallow Jesus' words that he was the true bread that came down from heaven for the life of the world.

Then, Jesus was saying these things while he was teaching at the synagogue. Synagogue is where the students gathered to study the Law of Moses, and the law clearly prohibited eating of the flesh with blood in it. It was part of God's covenant with Noah, later codified in the book of Law, Leviticus. So, for those disciples, the students of the law listening to Jesus teach in the synagogue, when Jesus said, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life," he sounded very politically incorrect. They found this teaching of Jesus hard to accept, even offensive.

Jesus knew it would be hard for them to understand and to accept, but he was trying to break through their understanding of the law to open their eyes and hearts to the deeper truth of incarnation, the Word made Flesh; that Jesus was the true food and his blood was the true drink, because he was God's Word that became flesh to dwell among them and in him was life. In fact, that's what John states at the beginning of his Gospel. In the person of Jesus was the Flesh and Spirit joined together as living bread, God's gift for the life of the world.

Martin Luther made a comment I found helpful. Reflecting on this Scripture, he pointed out that Jesus did not just offer his flesh to be some food to be consumed. Rather, the point is it was "HIS" flesh, unlike any other. "HIS" flesh is the Word of God, the Spirit of God, the Breath of God, the Wisdom of God, that came from heaven. Then, to eat his flesh and to drink his blood means to live by the living Word of the living God; it would mean to ingest and internalize

the Word of God in our lives, which would mean that our lives would be transformed to be the living bread for the life of the world.

It would mean, we would no longer live for ourselves but for the world to flourish. It would also mean we let go of blindly following the dead letters of the law and instead listen for the still small voice of the Spirit and be led by it, risking making mistakes and trusting God's guidance and providence. To live with our flesh inspired by the Spirit. Flesh and Spirit no longer as a metaphor but the reality that defines our being.

So, the life that is sustained by eating Jesus looks different from one person to the next, and what Spirit-inspired Flesh and Blood show up in our world cannot be contained in one sermon, or even in several. But I can share with you one such life I've witnessed recently.

I'm in conversation with someone who wants me to do his funeral. Let's call him Jack. Jack doesn't look like he'll be dying anytime soon, but he wants to be prepared; or, rather, he is preparing me to carry out his funeral just as he wants it; it seems to me, he's chosen me to be his flesh to conduct his own funeral when he is no longer in flesh. Jack wants me to know him deep enough, so people can experience his spirit through the service I lead. I told him I'll do my best following the Spirit.

Jack is someone who experiences his life as a constant prayer, and sees the way his life has unfolded as the answer to his prayer; his life has not been free of suffering. He's lived through a difficult divorce, and his second happy marriage was cut short by an unexpected death of his wife. Still, he's at a place where, he looks back at all of his life and see it as answer to his prayer, and he lives with a conviction that God knows him and loves him, and that when his earthly life is over, he knows he will find himself held in the welcoming arm of God. Jack says, "I want them to have the assurance that I have, and I want them, at my funeral, to experience the presence of God, because that's where I'll be."

Ah, I got it. In this funeral, he wants me to do in flesh what he can no longer do because he has left the world of flesh. He is someone who has fed on Jesus as his daily living bread. His flesh is still with him, but I know he is already living the eternal life, because I know for him Jesus is his daily bread.

How is Jesus your daily bread?