

John 6:51-58

⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” ⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 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.”

Food and Drink for the Journey

August 16, 2015

Pastor Sally May

Ok - just so you know – I did not choose today’s text. It is the Gospel reading from the Common Lectionary – the Common Lectionary being a weekly list of scripture readings meant to unite churches as they worship with common biblical texts. This past spring members of the worship committee along with your clergy, Peter and I, talked about offering a theme for summer worship. Me and my bright ideas suggested the theme of “bread of life” as I noticed that from the end of July through most of August this was the theme in the lectionary readings from the Gospel of John. That is where our offertory response for the summer comes from. That is why Anna Bushey made bread for communion Sunday on August 2nd. It is why the scripture reading for 5 weeks has been from the Gospel of John, Chapter 6..... and will be again next week. Perhaps a sign of my lack of organization or my naiveté, but I did not pay close enough attention to the Gospel texts and our preaching schedules to realize that I would be challenged with offering all of you food for thought (no pun, or perhaps pun intended) – a message – a sermon grounded in today’s scripture reading. Some of you have heard in this past week my angst over the language “eating my flesh and drinking my blood.” Now, I recognize that there are some here this morning who can and do relate to this language, who can engage, appreciate, and find spiritual connection. You have my utmost respect. But, I confess

that for me it is has been a struggle to find value.... it is so raw... so gorey....so gruesome sounding... as someone said when I shared my reservations... so icky.... Yet, the good news is that through prayer, study and discernment I do believe I have discovered, at least for myself, a way to connect to the scripture, and to have this text inform my faith and my understanding and connection with Jesus and with God. I have discovered an understanding that interprets and speaks a language I can not only comprehend but embrace and perhaps claim as my own what I now appreciate as a beautiful text. For me this is more evidence that words do matter, language matters....

Those who were at my ecumenical council last January in Jeffersonville may remember my sharing how language has been a barrier to my understanding, acceptance, and embrace of the Christian faith and Church. What I shared at that time and share in portion now has helped me to want to find meaning and value from John 6:51-58.

“Christian doctrines have been a barrier to my acceptance of the Christian faith since I was a teen. I find human constructs and concepts of God, human beings, Jesus Christ, the church, and eternal life as attempts to understand and explain that which surpasses all understanding to be both limiting and confusing. Historically, dogma and doctrine attempt to streamline or eliminate the mystery, to make faith safe and approachable. The beauty of faith is trust in the mystery, and how better to be faithful than to honor what we don't know or understand. Human language is necessarily restrictive. Attempting to explain a God who surpasses all understanding with language is to limit all that God has been, is and shall be. As a result we threaten to, and often do, limit God and our understanding of our relationship with God and, in turn, with one another. Yet, language is how we learn, grow, and communicate with one another, so rather than dismiss Christian doctrine, it behooves us to utilize the various doctrines as means by which to bring forward the faith of our ancestors whose stories are told in scripture (the Word of

God) all of which were written in particular times in human history. It is necessary to translate and reinterpret both scripture and Christian doctrine in today's language maintaining relevancy of our faith for people living in the 21st century.”

With that in mind, I have spent the last weeks studying, praying, and discerning how to not simply dismiss the text but to understand and to authentically accept, own, and proclaim as good, as a Christian, the very idea of eating flesh and drinking blood. I share with you now the fruits of that labor.

Today's text is about intimacy.

Jesus is asking us, telling us to ingest all that he is. To take into our own bodies, to incorporate him into our very beings. I'm sure you've all heard the adage “you are what you eat.” Jesus is saying we must fully ingest who he is, what he is all about, his physical presence – his flesh - and what keeps him alive and nourished – we must make him a part of us – of our living, our physical life. Jesus is inviting us into a way of not only living but of existing, of being. We will abide with Jesus and Jesus with us. We will stay connected with one another, dwell within each other, be in lasting relationship.

Today's text is about relationship.

“Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.” (vs 57) Through Jesus we are connected to, in relationship with God. While in seminary I was told, and often felt, that I was more Unitarian Universalist (UU) than Christian. Many half-joked that I was where I belonged as a member of the United Church of Christ, the UCC. For UU's, they understand ‘UCC’ to be “Unitarians Considering Christ.” And I fit that understanding. And frankly, I struggled with that for a long time. I felt grief and guilt that I might be a Christian in sheep's clothing. Yet, again, with study, prayer, and discernment, I am

able to own – most of the time - and authentically claim the identity of Christian because I cannot completely get to God without going through Jesus. The life of Jesus of Nazareth, and how he lived his life, what he stood for, how he understood and lived his faith as a Jewish man, and died as a result of his resolve to speak and live a truth that challenged authority and human systems and structure resonate with me, speak to me as an example of God’s best creation; offering both hope and challenge.

Yet, doctrines and traditions, perceptions and experiences that clashed with my concept of God and Jesus as all that is good have been and can be walls to my relationship with God via the church. And I know that to be true for others. I wonder what some of you were thinking when I read today’s text. Was “eat my flesh and drink my blood” a kind of negative distraction, even for a moment? Would you have rather I did not use today’s text? It did cross my mind to not follow the lectionary, and that is a shame. It is a shame when we let language turn us away from the Bible, to keep us from exploring the beauty, the mystery, the truth that I believe is offered.

A few years ago I struggled with the doctrine of the Trinity. This Church teaching was a real barrier to my understanding and acceptance of Jesus as divine, of the Christian faith in general, for a very long time. Again, it goes back to the language..... Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

This language was a barrier to my understanding and appreciation for the concept of the Trinity. Not only for its patriarchal language, but to identify God in anthropomorphic language is to limit God. God is more than male or female, father, mother. God is Mystery. The doctrine of the Trinity speaks to the Mystery and God’s permeating presence in the world by way of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, creating and joining together all that has been, all that is, and all that will be.

So, again, through study, prayer and discernment I have found new language that offers clarity in appreciating the concept of the Trinity with the understanding that God is Life, with a capital ‘L.’ The essence of who we are, as created beings, is rooted in God, Creator of all that is life that we have ever known, do know, will ever know. Rather than God as Father as the first

person of Trinity, I understand God as Creator of Life. And I will not spend the time today explaining how I came to new language for Jesus and the Holy Spirit only to say that within the relationship of the Trinity I understand God as Creator of Life, Jesus as Love of Life, and the Holy Spirit as Breath of Life. This new language more truly reflects my understanding of the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit AND it opened a door, offered an invitation to be in relationship with our Creator, our Love, our Breath of Life.

It is Creation, Love and Breath that we exist, that we have our being and that we are a part of something greater than ourselves all the while connecting us and binding us together in the bond of Love. So Jesus, in his offering of his body, that we eat this flesh – his physical being – he is offering us to take in his presence, his teachings, his example, the sacrifice of his body for the common good. He is inviting us to ingest all of that, all of who he was and did and to claim him and what he did and stood for as a part of who we are. And Jesus tells us we must also drink his blood – blood, which is not only nourishment for our bodies, providing oxygen from our hearts to our brains, to all of our body and bringing back tired blood to be renewed, re-energized, re-oxygenated – bringing in new breath. To drink Jesus' blood is to drink life and living, Jesus' life breath and living example. This invitation offers not only breath of 'L'ife (with a capital L) but also faith, hope, and love, AND courage, tenacity, challenge, energy, connection, sacrifice, and companionship. And he is offering relationship with God.

Through the body and blood of Jesus there is relationship with God, Creator of Life, Jesus, Love of Life, and the Holy Spirit, Breath of Life. A relationship that offers *us* life, love, and breath. Beautiful indeed.

Today's text is about Discernment.

In my study I learned that the literal translation to "eat" Jesus' body is to chew on or to gnaw. As I thought about this I couldn't help but think of the phrase "chew on this"... and in that context to eat Jesus is to think about, deeply, the meaning of Jesus..... What does it mean to believe in Jesus? To be a disciple? To not only claim the name Christian but to be, by the essence of Jesus dwelling in your body and soul, to be a Christian?

I suspect that together we might come up with some answers that were the same and some that were different. What it means to me, to receive, to take in Jesus into our bodies and our souls is to see with eyes of love, hear with ears of understanding, and to live a life that cares for the widow and the orphan, the poor and the outcast, to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit the prisoner, to free the prisoner, heal the sick, pray for all. And to sacrifice for the common good. To give up our lives of isolation and individualism and be born anew into a life of commonality and working for and living into a peaceable kingdom.

All of that, it seems to me, requires incredibly nutritious food and drink for both body and soul. Thank God Jesus is offering us food and drink for the journey, an offering that invites us to take him for ourselves, into our own lives where he will abide with us and in us forever. Amen.