

SERMON

August 26, 2018

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John 6

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

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But 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. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

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

Grace and Peace to you . . .

If you've been in worship here or elsewhere over the past month or so, you may have noticed some similar themes running through the gospel readings. In fact, for five weeks now, we've been working our way through the 6th chapter of John.

It starts with a large crowd that is following Jesus, "because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." (That's what the passage says.) With the help of the disciples and five loaves and two fish, Jesus fed the crowd. 5000 of them, maybe more. And after everyone ate all they wanted, there were 12 baskets of leftovers.

As the chapter continues, the crowds continue to look for Jesus and follow him. The disciples cross the sea, where they encounter Jesus walking on the water, and then have a miraculous sudden arrival on shore. The crowds make their way across the sea, because who wouldn't want to be close to this teacher who helps the sick and feeds them all they want when they are hungry?

For the remainder of the chapter, Jesus teaches and responds to the reactions of his followers.

Jesus talks about bread from heaven, Moses and manna in the wilderness, the Bread of Life, eating flesh, and eternal life. There are miraculous signs, power and enthusiasm, and confusing teachings. Then we reach today's gospel reading, which ends the chapter.

I want to try and step back to the 1st century for a moment. Bread was a staple. They wouldn't have had the variety of foods we have, and they certainly wouldn't have had low-carb diets. Bread was regularly what they ate. The majority of those following Jesus were peasants. They were not wealthy and would not have been able to afford much to eat. Bread was the common, everyday food, and it was often what kept them from starvation, often the difference between life and death.

Also. We sometimes forget that these stories sound very different to us than the first hearers. It's been 2000 years since these stories were first told. Since some of us may have heard them stories since we were young, so, we are accustomed some strange ideas. It can be helpful to try and set aside our own familiarity, and think about how these words would have sounded back then. It might be lost on us, But the surprise and horror as Jesus talks about eating flesh and drinking blood wouldn't have been lost on the hearers of John's gospel. It is shocking and jarring. They don't understand what Jesus could possibly mean.

We don't take Jesus words "eat my flesh and drink my blood" literally. We have come to see that he never meant it that way. Jesus is talking about his followers taking his teachings and actions to heart in our own lives. Making Jesus a part of ourselves, part of who we are at the core. Jesus calls the disciples and us to follow him. Jesus tells the crowds and us to take him in, using this unsettling image. We are invited to incorporate Jesus' love, his forgiveness, his compassion, his grace into who we are, into the way we see our neighbors and our world, and into how we live. Make who Jesus is and what he does a part of ourselves. Shaping our lives to his. So much that the people around us could notice a similarity between Jesus' teachings and way of living and our own lives.

As we make our way through the gospel, and this chapter, the story has been building to the point where Jesus' disciples finally say "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" At this point, they are reacting to the whole of Jesus' message. Not only the shocking/surprising notion of eating and drinking Jesus. It's beyond that.

The disciples have been with Jesus since chapter one. They have seen how he interacts with the people; how he reaches out to the crowds, and responds to individuals who are in need. They have heard his teachings, and watched him break rules, and cast aside boundaries, and offend those who are in power. They have heard and seen for themselves the power and the risk of what Jesus is, and what Jesus does.

To eat flesh and drink blood is certainly not appealing. But neither is it appealing to shape the center of our lives around Jesus' love and grace, forgiveness and welcome, inclusion and justice. That requires a great deal from us.

If I have a choice between eating the last of the death by chocolate ice cream in my freezer or sharing it with my daughter, I'd rather eat it myself. If I have a choice between ignoring the cars trying to merge in front of me on North Atherton or letting them in, I'd rather ignore them. If I have a choice between harboring a long-time grudge or forgiving someone who hurt me but isn't sorry, I'd rather hold that grudge. If we have a choice between inconveniencing ourselves to help someone or just focusing on our own needs, we may prefer to focus on ourselves. If we have a choice between holding on to our opinions about people or groups we don't like or trying to see each person we encounter as God's beloved child, we'd often prefer to continue pretending they aren't. We could go on and on with examples like these. There are countless ways we struggle to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And we also find ourselves struggling to figure out what it really means to love our neighbor as we love ourselves; Not instead of ourselves. We must search for the balance of the two. If we have a choice between focusing on our own shortcomings and times we have failed, or seeing ourselves with the compassion and love through which God sees us, we may prefer to only look at the imperfections, not seeing how deeply God loves each and every one of us.

Jesus calls us to follow him, despite how difficult this teaching is. Jesus calls us to take in who we see and experience him to be. To live lives marked with love, compassion, forgiveness and giving. To respond to the world around us, the people in our lives, and to what is imperfect in ourselves.

In communion, we eat the bread and drink the wine. We hear the words, "The body of Christ. The blood of Christ." As we eat and drink, we take Jesus into ourselves. In bread and wine we meet God's grace and love and forgiveness. We are connected to followers of Jesus across the world, and throughout time. And we are transformed and empowered to do what is impossible alone: To love God. To Love our neighbor. And to Love ourselves.

This is hard. I know it is. You know it is. It's no wonder that the reading tells us that *many of Jesus disciples turned back and no longer went about with him*. Seems like it was too much. They just couldn't.

Jesus asks the 12 closest disciples if they also want to leave. And Simon Peter, ever the spokesperson for the group, says, "Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." I love this passage. Peter is so honest and vulnerable in his statement. It's like he's saying, "There's nowhere else for us. You have what we need."

And I don't think Peter is talking only about life beyond death, when we and all creation will be in joyful harmony with God. I think he is also talking about life here and now. A rich and abundant life, shaped by the love and faithfulness of God. Life marked by our living with the kind of compassion and forgiveness and passion for justice and inclusion that Jesus teaches and the Spirit inspires. Life enhanced by an ongoing awareness of God's presence and action in the world.

I remember when I was young, and I took communion at worship. After I chewed the bread, I drank the wine, and I was always struck by the way the wine burned on the way down. I knew even then that it was the alcohol, but the warmth felt like God's presence in me. Now it seems to me that a little bit of the fire of Pentecost fills us each week, moving us to continue this impossible task of embracing the word of Jesus, of reaching out to our neighbor, of caring for the needs of the world, of working for justice for those who are oppressed.