

Proper 15B

John 6:51-58

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The Gospel of John reading that we hear today is the third part of the Bread of Life discourse in which we hear Jesus tell people that He is the bread and blood of life. We will hear the final part next week. But the portion we hear today is the one that sounds... to put it bluntly, gross and disturbing. I remember the first time I heard it as a child struggling to not shout out, "Ewww! That's gross!!", which would have earned a hard glare from my mother and an even harder glare from my grandmother. But my reaction then is like the reaction of many of those listening to Jesus' words over the centuries, even if they are scared to admit it to anyone else.

Taken literally, this section of the Gospels can be difficult to digest, no pun intended. Our visceral reaction is one of shock, and for children who think literally rather than in abstraction, the words Jesus speaks today are downright scary. This is one of those sections of the Gospels where I can imagine the disciples all those centuries ago saying, "This is a PR nightmare. Jesus, can you rephrase that even just a little?"

John's Gospel tends to be the most unique of the four Gospels because there things found in John that don't appear in the other three. For example, in the other three Gospels we hear of the Last Supper meal where Jesus tells His disciples to "Take. Eat. This is my body." But in John's Gospel all we hear of that last night is that Jesus rose from supper and began washing the disciples' feet. The Bread of Life discourse is John's version of the eucharistic meal, and it challenges us to look at the eucharist in a completely different light.

At a deacon's retreat, the question was posed, "What does it mean to take the eucharist into the world?" While everyone else talked about walking out the church doors with travelling communion boxes containing bread and wine to share with those who couldn't attend the Sunday service, my mind raced down a completely different road. So, buckle up as we take the road less traveled by.

John's Gospel begins by telling us that Jesus is the Word made flesh. The Word, also called the Logos, is what lies at the heart of creation. It is where love, goodness, and truth reside. Jesus embodies God's words that bring life and light to the world. Jesus came down from heaven as 'flesh and blood'.

In our modern culture we hear the term 'flesh and blood' used to emphasize the qualities of humanity as in, "I am only flesh and blood." In addition, we use it to indicate our bond or link to someone in our family as in, "You are my flesh and blood." But the phrase 'flesh and blood'

also refers to our whole person- our hearts, minds, and souls- to be fully human as God created us to be, full of love, goodness, and truth. Jesus is the link between our humanity and our divine being. He is a member of our family of man that bonds us to our family of God. He gives His whole person to the world, sacrificing His flesh and blood in the service to His brothers and sisters and giving life to us all.

In the musical *Aladdin*, as Aladdin evades authorities after stealing a loaf of bread he sings, “Gotta eat to live.” He is right. We must eat to live. Bread and wine were staple foods for our ancestors. But like manna, the bread served at meals and the one Aladdin pilfered from the bread makers cart, will come and go. Physical bread doesn’t last forever. The bread that Jesus offers is different. It doesn’t come from outside our bodies, instead it comes from within our souls, a part of our whole person. The bread that Jesus offers doesn’t have to be stolen. It is freely given.

What Jesus is getting at in John’s Gospel is that there are two different types of bread- the physical and the spiritual. Both require chewing before we make them a part of ourselves. When it comes to spiritual bread, we chew on the deeper meaning of God’s words and the Word that is Jesus Christ. The flesh that Jesus tells us we must eat, or if we use the literal Greek- gnaw on- and the blood we must drink for us to live forever, refers to taking the Word of God into our hearts and souls. Jesus calls us to chew or gnaw on what it means to be divine in our human form and how the Word of God shapes and molds us. In doing so, we take into ourselves the love, goodness, and truth- the ‘flesh and blood’- that makes Jesus who He is, and then everything that resides in Jesus will abide, will live, in us.

Jesus is the bread of life. By eating our fill of His words of love, grace, and forgiveness, we become the bread of life that walks out of the doors of the church and into the world. One of my favorite choral hymns is “Christ Has No Body Now But Yours”. We are His eyes, hands, and feet, making the presence of Christ real and visible. We are bread for a world that hungers for love, hope, and peace.

When we participate in the Holy Eucharist at church, we begin by hearing God’s Word through scripture. We chew on them, and for more difficult passages we gnaw of them, until we can make sense of them, so that they become part of our whole person. Then we come to the table to eat and drink the bread and the wine in fellowship with our brothers and sisters. But the Eucharist doesn’t end until we leave with the voice of our deacons ringing in our ears “to go forth into the world in the name of Christ, with the power of the Spirit, to love and serve the Lord.” Remember what I told you about the Last Supper in John’s gospel? Jesus rose from supper and began washing the disciples’ feet. He left the table, got down on His knees, and worked in service to others.

That is what it means to take the eucharist into the world. We leave this Holy table to go and serve others. Our flesh and blood bodies sharing the flesh and blood of our hearts and souls that is Jesus Christ. His love. His compassion. The hope He gives. The forgiveness He extends. The peace He offers. This is the eucharist that we take out into the world.

Laundry Love is a perfect example of this where both the body and soul are fed. For those who come, their physical hunger is relieved with a lunch. Their physical thirst is slaked with water. Their soul is fed with an outpouring of unconditional love. They are reminded that they are important and not forgotten. They see and feel that someone cares for them. Jesus fed the bodies and souls of five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Laundry Love does it with quarters and sack lunches.

At the eucharistic table, Jesus invites us to, “Take. Eat. This is my body which is given for you.” The eucharist He tells us to take into the world is the life we live in service to others, bringing life and light to the world. When this Holy Eucharist ends, the real work of the eucharist begins as we go out to feed the world, both body and soul.

Amen