

Pastor's Message – 8/18/24
John 6:51-58

As we heard last week as Jesus referred to Himself as the Bread of Life and as having come down from heaven, Jesus had some hard sayings and difficult teachings and, after His death and resurrection, as His followers began to carry out His teachings, they attracted attention because they followed those hard teachings. Just as the Jews had problems with Jesus' teachings, so did the Romans, but for different reasons.

We know that early Christians in Rome suffered from persecution by the Romans. Interestingly enough, though, this persecution did not stem from a Roman aversion to this new Christian God. The Romans were, in general, a fairly tolerant society. They were quick to allow the cultures of conquered people as long as they could collect taxes. However, there were things that the Romans considered to be unacceptable, much like our society today. Among these unacceptable actions were cannibalism and incest. A major reason the Romans persecuted Christians was because they did not understand the language Christians used. When two married Christians referred to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, the Romans' minds leapt to incest. And when they talked about sharing in the body and blood of communion, Rome misinterpreted it as cannibalism. The Romans persecuted Christians, in part, because they did not understand them.

If educated Romans had that much trouble, imagine how the disciples — mostly uneducated, working-class men — felt when Jesus spoke like this about communion!

When we read the Bible, we have to remember that the Bible speaks to the reality of three worlds: the first is the world where and when the events that are depicted take place. In the Bible text for today, this is first-century Judea, Samaria, etc.

The second world is the target audience for the writer. In this case, the community to whom John wrote lived in the second century, sometime between 75-100 AD. The writer is probably a Jewish-Christian who was probably writing for a Jewish-Christian community in conflict with the leaders of the synagogue.

The third world is made up of the readers and hearers of today, i.e. us. We are a very different audience from the early Christians almost 2,000 years ago for whom this text was written. Our challenge is to understand

what the author was trying to convey in his own time, so that we can make sense of it in today's context.

We understand the reference to include the Lord's Supper, but the first world would not have. Both current readers and the audience of the gospel writer are later than this setting of the original event likely understand the references to eating the living bread or bread from heaven as a part of our Communion understanding. But another part of the confusion of the people within the story is the idea in Jesus' shift from the concept of living bread and associating that bread as His body.

Jesus says in verse 55: "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." Many of his followers to this point begin to leave Jesus precisely because he put things this clearly, and to their minds, offensively. But, for the Christian community to whom this gospel was composed, its first hearers, there was no offense here at all. Receiving the very body and blood of Christ each time they gathered for Sunday worship was for them a source of life and hope. What is that life and hope for us in Jesus as the bread of life? What does it mean for us for Jesus to be the bread from heaven?

I want to suggest three things:

a. Jesus is bread for us in our search for meaning for our lives. Thomas H. Naylor, Magdalena R. Naylor, and William H. Willimon suggest in their book, *The Search for Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) that the search for meaning and significance is the most important psychological issue of our and any time. Jesus may offer living bread in connecting us to the divine and giving us an understanding of purpose in life in loving and serving others in a way that helps establish God's reign in the here and now.

b. Jesus is bread for us in our need for support in facing trials in our lives. The examples for this are many. People have been able to overcome all kinds of obstacles because of the faith they have had in God through Jesus. People still remember Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his struggles in South Africa, or Bethany Hamilton from *Soul Surfer*, the champion surfer after a shark attack took an arm, or any of the paralympic athletes of the recent Olympic games, and you may know other examples personally of individuals who have suffered trials and are an inspiration to you because their faith in God has helped them to be "overcomers."

c. Jesus is bread for us in our moments of desperation. He is a lifeline. Some of us face those moments more frequently than

others. But hanging on by a thread to our sanity is something most of us have experienced at least once. Such moments may include depression, the inability to find a job, or family struggles.

Jesus offers us a solution; He offers us the only way to overcome. He says “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. [Only] those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.” The gospel commends Holy Communion as THE means, par excellence, of abiding in Jesus Christ (verse 56).

Communion, gathering at the Lord’s Table, celebrating the Eucharist – whatever is your preferred wording – is the way for us to get close and stay close to Jesus. Eating His body and drinking His blood enables us to receive the nourishment and grace He offers and to do His work in the world.

We can begin by feasting on the words of Jesus. When Jesus asks the 12 disciples if they wish to go away, Peter answers by saying, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (v. 68). The words of Jesus remain a source of solid spiritual food for us, whether Jesus is describing himself as "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25) or commanding us to "love one another" (John 13:34).

Since Jesus is the word of God in human form, we can always be strengthened by what he says to us in the gospels. His words are trustworthy and true, and he remains for us "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Next, we can be nourished by communion, the holy meal that includes the bread of life and the cup of salvation. On the night before his death, Jesus took a loaf of bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." After supper, he took a cup also, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

Jesus instructs us to eat and drink of the bread and the wine to remember him, or to honor him. Receiving communion is an important way of living in Christ and allowing him to live in us.

Finally, we can go out to be the body of Christ in the world. Christians who feast on the words of Jesus and nourish themselves with communion become nothing less than the flesh-and-blood presence of Jesus in the world today. We can be the hands and feet of Jesus, whether we are young or old, male or female, white or black, liberal or conservative.

The Greek verb for “to eat” changes in our Bible reading today from “*phagein*,” a generic term for eating with some symbolic overtones, to

“*trogein*,” a much more specific verb meaning “to chew upon.” Consuming Jesus is not a leisure pursuit, one that can be done just a few minutes a day. It’s like the diet advice that one should chew their food 40 times before swallowing. Perhaps you’ve had the experience of getting food stuck in your throat. We have to chew thoroughly.

Taking Jesus into ourselves is a full-time challenge, one that transforms us from the inside out. After all, “you are what you eat.” “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life,” promises Jesus, “and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 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” (vv. 54-57).

Is our passage today a communion passage? It sure sounds like it! I’ve felt compelled all throughout this 5-week series on Jesus as the Bread of Life to celebrate Communion this Sunday – even though it isn’t the 1st Sunday of the month, and we just took Communion two weeks ago. It also gives one the hint that there is something more than just that morsel we eat on Sundays.

Then the question is: Should we be looking for the power of God working in us? Should we feel an emotional experience? Has this bread and wine really become body and blood? Is it only an accident that it tastes like bread and grape juice?

It may only taste and look like bread and wine, but when Jesus’ body and blood are in us, are we different? Do we feel the gift of eternity?

Eating the Body of Christ cannot be interpreted as cannibalism or we miss the point, as some did in our text. It means that when we eat the bread and drink the grape juice Christ is becoming part of us. His mission is encased in his love. This is what guarantees our eternal life. Through the sacrifice of his body, Christ cleanses us and makes us one with him.

The manna that the people of God ate in the wilderness was just manna. It was just bread to keep the people alive physically. The bread of our Lord keeps us alive spiritually in this world and the next.

Think of the vital importance of this verse as you chew on the bread today and drink from the cup. It should change us every time we take it. As you eat the bread and drink from the cup, you have the opportunity again to thank the Lord for his sacrifice for our forgiveness and serve him with a renewed spirit.