

Gospel - John 6: 51-58

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Patti Case



This is a messy gospel. Eating and drinking flesh and blood. Ugh. Sounds like a movie that I DON'T need to watch.

We can wave our hands and simply say, "Well of COURSE the author didn't mean THAT!" But like all things biblical, there's a lot to unpack here.

Those of you who know your Bible know that 90 percent of the Gospel of John is different from the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, which present a common, or "synoptic" story. One fundamental difference, of course, is that John does not recount a "Last Supper," which we associate with the birth of our modern Communion rite. Some biblical scholars believe that the passage we heard today is John's offering regarding the Last Supper, but it comes well before those final hours. More generally, this book continually speaks of theological interpretations rather than narration of events. That's the beauty, and the mystery, of the gospel according to John.

It's also believed that this gospel may have been written from a different perspective, later than the others, when the fledgling church was confronting different challenges. One such challenge was "is Christ God? And if Christ is God, he cannot have been a human being." Of course, John's gospel begins with those famous words: "The Word was with God and the Word was God" and later, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Yes, indeed, the gospel says with those first few words, Christ is God in flesh. Period.

We can think of the word "flesh" in today's gospel as it relates to the first chapter of John, "the Word became flesh, But if Jesus is flesh, then I'm with the Jews in our story today: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Given a couple thousand years of perspective and thousands of Biblical scholars unraveling the words from the book of John, we can easily skip over Jesus' provocative words in favor of a more benign and less literal interpretation. One such interpretation that's on the edge is transubstantiation – the idea that bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. I have trouble with that notion. Frankly, I find the idea distracting from the holy rite of Communion. It still tastes like bread and wine to me, and not being a cannibal, I'm good with that.

On the other hand, Episcopalians believe in the Real Presence of Christ in Communion. It's an awesome mystery, one that is clear at times and at other moments obscure, like the smoke hiding the Olympic Mountains over the past few days. Here's a great explanation from the glossary of terms published by the Episcopal Church: "Belief in the Real Presence does not imply a claim to know how Christ is present in the eucharistic elements. Belief in the real presence does not imply belief that the consecrated eucharistic elements cease to be bread and wine."

I am comforted by the thought that I do not have to know how this works, I just need to know that it does. Many of us find ourselves in thin places during the Words of Institution, and those thin places are moments of clarity not because we "get" the meaning literally, but because we "get" the point.

I flipped back to "Eucharist" in that same glossary of terms and I found this reference to the Book of Common Prayer: "Christ's sacrifice is made present by the eucharist, and in it we are united to his one self-offering."

That's comfortable. Familiar. But now that I've brought you back from the brink, I fundamentally believe that this gospel was meant to be more provocative. To shock us Christians into immediate action, not to convey warm, gooey feelings of faraway rainbows and unicorns. Again, this isn't a memorial of the Last Supper as we find in the other gospels. John's recounting is more.

In the words of Fr. Bertie Pearson, Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Georgetown, TX, and Dean of the Austin Area Convocation of Clergy, "Christ says that eternal life is neither a thing to be pursued or acquired, nor is it a place that we go after we die. It is instead a person; eternal life *is* Jesus Christ."

Eternal life is not a place that we go after we die. It is for the here and the now. Every. Single. Day of our lives here on earth and beyond. It is totally and utterly different from mortal life, says Fr. Pearson.

It's different from manna, it's different than the dinner you had last night. This gospel is telling us that Jesus is not just on the menu, he is the main course. As we've struggled over the past months with COVID closures and restrictions, new faces and the loss of old ones, political and social challenges to our practices and to some of our core beliefs, it's understandable if we lose sight of that fact. There is so much "busyness" in the church. Where in all of that do we remember that by feeding on Jesus Christ, by taking him into our hearts and lives, we receive life?

Jesus is the main course, and Jesus sustains us whether we take Communion once a week or once a year or, like the great hermit St. Mary of Egypt, once or twice in our lives.

Returning to the passage where the Jews respond by asking how Jesus can suggest giving flesh to eat. Not just flesh, but his flesh. They're saying, "Hey, buddy. That's not OK according to our laws and customs." Next week we'll read about how many followers rejected Jesus after this turning point. But rather than respond in a conciliatory manner, Jesus' next words shock his audience even more profoundly. "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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."

In this section of the gospel, the writer shifts the context a bit, moving from the use of the word "phage," which translates to polite eating, to the word "trogan," which equates to animals gnawing or munching at a trough. We miss the nuance in the English translation, but the latter provides a much coarser visual image, doesn't it? And yes, much more shocking.

Shock and a sense of urgency: Starvation, gorging, desperate gulping rather than a polite little dinner among friends. In other words, consuming Jesus is not a leisure pursuit. Without the body and blood of Jesus, we're simply going through the motions, patting our lips with our napkins and excusing ourselves from the table. What we're talking about here? It's a full-time, lifetime challenge. Jesus' body and blood fill us spiritually with everlasting life. And we become Jesus' hands and feet in the world, the flesh and blood presence of Jesus. This is sitting with strangers, not cozying up to friends. It's vying for hearts and minds and souls, fighting for that last scrap in the bowl, not waiting our turn. Now that's a thin place!

Maybe the bumper sticker in all of this is: Live today as though it's eternity. Maybe you've seen Groundhog Day or Fifty First Dates or another movie that keeps coming back to the same day. It's an illustration of the definition of insanity, right? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result? But what if every day, we strove to do it right the first time rather than saying "I can wait till tomorrow to call my friend who's sick or hurting," or "I can call and apologize next week?"

Can we wait to be Jesus' hands and feet? After all, Jesus says "I will raise them up on the last day." Surely I can put off telling my neighbor the Good News until tomorrow. I don't have to be pushy. And yet, we are admonished to eat and drink, no, to gorge ourselves at the trough today. There's a sense of urgency in this passage, and it's repeated in our lesson from Ephesians: Be careful then how you live...making the most of the time....be filled with the spirit."

That's a tall order. That's a tall order requiring us to be proactive. Now. Today. Because Jesus is the main course, and it's imperative that we eat and drink our fill.

So nosh on that as you take communion this morning. And may the main course fill you, nourish you to be God's hands and feet in the world. Amen