

Pentecost 12B/Lectionary 21B

August 23, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Joshua 24:1—2a, 14—18 Psalm 34:15—22 Ephesians 6:10—20 ***John 6:56—69***

This is our last week in Jesus' "Bread of Life" discourse in John chapter 6. And perhaps, it contains some of the most disturbing rhetoric in all of the Gospels.

Because this portion of text gets broken across two Sundays, I'd like to read it to you in its entirety. Jesus says:

"I 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." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So 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. 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. 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."

All this talk of eating flesh and drinking blood was most certainly disturbing to those who heard Jesus on that day. We're told the disciples said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" I would imagine they had a whole lot more than that to say! Not only was this talk of drinking blood in direct violation of Jewish law, it also violates one of the most basic of human taboos. Even hearing these words today makes us squirm. Let's be honest: This talk of eating flesh and drinking blood reeks of cannibalism. This is such a deeply held taboo that we rarely speak of cannibalism, except perhaps in relation to certain aboriginal tribes. It is just too disgusting for us to even consider. It is no small wonder, then, that many of Jesus' disciples turned away and stopped following him when they heard him say this.

Biblical scholars refer to this passage euphemistically as one of Jesus' "hard sayings." It seems that many of them are so disgusted that even they shy away from writing about these disturbing words at any length, instead focusing on some higher-order treatment of the text without dealing with the pure – if you'll excuse the expression – *fleshiness* of Jesus' words.

And yet, this is exactly what our Gospel writer is trying to get at. At the time John was writing the popular heresy of the day was gnosticism. According to gnostic belief, Jesus simply *appeared* to be a man, but was not. Gnostics believed that matter – humans included – was inherently corrupt. They believed that it was obvious that God would not have chosen to take on a corrupt form. So, therefore, Jesus could not have been a man, but instead was a purely spiritual being who only *appeared* to be human.

Later in today's reading Jesus says, “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have given to you are spirit and life.” If we look only at these words, “The flesh is useless,” it might appear that Jesus is affirming gnostic belief that all matter is corrupt. But in fact, these words of Jesus are in continuity with long-established Jewish thought regarding the nature of humanity. Going all the way back to the book of Genesis, when God breathed life into Adam, Jews believed that people are “inspired” flesh. The two – flesh and spirit – are inseparable. The flesh is, indeed, useless without being inspired with the breath, the spirit, of God.

So apparently in direct opposition to the gnostic proposition, John purposefully emphasizes the fleshiness, the humanity, of Jesus. Not only is he a deeply spiritual being, but his is also human flesh and blood.

And so our “Bread of Life” discourse, which began with the feeding of the 5,000, concludes in this curious spot. How did we get from there to here?

Remember a few weeks ago when we talked about the function of signs in the Gospel of John? For John, there are no miracles, only signs of the true meaning of Jesus. The feeding of the 5,000 was just one of those signs. These signs challenge us to look beyond what we think we see. They challenge our perception.

There were many of Jesus' disciples who could not get beyond the meaning of the bread and loaves. They thought it was just a filling meal. Miraculous, yes, but they did not recognize it for the sign it was. Likewise, there were many of Jesus' disciples who could not get beyond the literal sense of Jesus' words. They were confounded, disgusted and offended, and turned away from following Jesus.

And so today, all this talk of eating flesh and drinking blood challenges us also to look beyond the pure literal sense of the words. It challenges us to see beyond the pure fleshiness of the words, to see beyond them to the sign they are intended to point toward. The sign is the Word, Jesus Christ, made flesh and who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. It is Jesus who offers the gift of eternal life to those whom God has gifted with faith. As one commentator put it:

A new life born of flesh and spirit is possible to those who believe, but if one limits one's understanding of life to one's preconceptions of what is possible in the flesh, one will receive nothing. Spirit and flesh must be held together; this is the heart of the incarnation.¹

Jesus knew these words would be difficult for people to hear. We can well imagine the scene, with disciples peeling off from the group, by ones and twos, slowly walking away scratching their heads. I can imagine there being very few, if any, remaining when Jesus turns to the Twelve and asks, “Do you also wish to go away?”

It is then that we hear Peter's great profession of faith. As the apparent spokesman for the group, Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” We know that even at this point the Twelve still did not perceive the fullness of who Jesus is and what he was going to do. However, they did not allow their lives and actions to be limited by their own preconceptions of what is, and is not, possible. They had the faith to trust in things beyond their understanding. They trusted in Jesus.

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Our Gospel writer refers to “The Twelve” only twice in his entire Gospel: in these verses and again in one of the resurrection stories. John seems to be intentionally differentiating the Twelve from the rest of the disciples who followed Jesus in this passage. And indeed, there are a number of ways they set themselves apart from the rest of the followers of Jesus:

- They put Jesus first by staying with Jesus;
- They were willing not to leave;
- They continue to walk with Jesus;
- They recognize Jesus as the only source;
- They recognize that Jesus has the words of eternal life; and,
- They believe and know that Jesus is the Holy one of God.²

It is in these attributes of the Twelve that I believe we can find some instruction for our own lives.

For instance, how often have we heard it said that we need to put Jesus first in our own lives? I know I've heard it said so often that it's become cliché. And yet, we know it's true. This goes back to the First Commandment: I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me.

Putting Jesus first seems to be a no-brainer, but if we're honest with ourselves, it's something we frequently fail to do. There are so many things that tempt us from keeping God properly in the center of our lives. As Luther would have said, we make idols out of all those things that tempt us away from God. I'm not even going to begin a litany of ways that happens, or what those idols may be; I'm sure you can think of them on your own.

But the really insidious thing that happens when we nudge God out of the center of our lives is that we begin to trust in ourselves and the idols we have created more than we trust in God. When we become self-centered and turn toward our own selfish ambitions, we fail to be the other-centered disciples God calls us to be. It is then that we fail to see the signs of God's activity in our lives. We may fail to heed God's call to new ways of ministering to our community.

As this congregation continues to move forward, I ask you to move forward in faith. We will seek to see the signs, to listen for the new ways that God is asking us to step out, in faith, to better be the church for our community.

I ask you to be intentional in your walk with Christ. We will best discern the signs of what God is already doing in our community, and what God intends for us to do, when we are firmly grounded in prayer, worship and study. It is in these things that we will be fed with the Bread of Life, so that we will be nourished and can, in turn, feed those with whom we seek to minister.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we know that you have the words of eternal life. We, as your gathered believers, ask to be fed and nourished with your Holy Word. Help us to be faithful disciples, following you always, even when your guidance may lead us to new and different places. Give us the courage and strength to follow you willingly, so that we may participate in your mission to unite all of creation in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

<1,768 words>

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- 1 Gail R. O'Day, "John" in *New Interpreters' Bible, Vol. IX: Luke, John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 610.
 - 2 Brian Stoffregen, "Proper 16 B: John 6:56-69 Exegetical Notes" downloaded from <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john6x56.htm> on August 22, 2009.