

Living Bread©

John 6:51-58

August 16, 2015

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Last week we heard similar words from Jesus about bread. And, this week we are still on a roll (no pun intended) about this living bread. There are a number of sermon titles that came to mind with this discourse from Jesus.

One valid title could be “You are What You Eat.”

At the men’s Bible Study, they suggested “Eat, Drink and be Jesus.” That would be valid as well.

Some of the titles I thought of just seemed a bit sacrilegious when talking about the Son of God. But I wonder how many of us understand just how shocking these words were to the Jewish people listening to him that day.

Even to us today, I think the words sounds gritty and a little nauseating. Did you know that the early Christians were accused of cannibalism?

Listening to these words of Jesus, people did not understand what he was talking about!

Our Communion liturgy is toned down quite a lot, using the other gospel writers’ language for the Last Supper, which uses the word Body. We are the body of Christ. “This is my body, given for you. This is my blood poured out for the sins of the world.”

But, even with it being less descriptive from these words in our text today, have you ever considered what someone might think who happened to come into worship when we are about to take Communion – someone who has never known anything about The Lord’s Supper? What would they think about this language we Christians use?

But, John is not talking about the Last Supper. In fact, John does not mention the Last Supper at all in his gospel account. This is not taking place the night before Jesus was going to die. Jesus is very much alive in this discourse. He is talking about living, not dying.

And he is using the Greek word *sarx*, which actually means flesh, not the word for body. He keeps saying over and over “unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life.”

One of the words Jesus uses, that is translated as eat, actually means “to chomp,” or “to chew.”

What in the world is Jesus trying to say? This sounds almost like a vampire movie, not a nice, respectable, Christian act of holiness. And yet he says it over and over and over again.

And Jesus says just what I was saying last week about taking a good-sized piece of bread for Communion, rather than a tiny crumb. Jesus says you should bring a hearty appetite to eat this flesh and blood. Surely someone here today is thinking “gross!”

Do you understand how offensive these words were to the Jews? For all the former generations up to that very day, they had been taught not to eat flesh and not to drink the blood of a living creature. For the people to eat meat, that animal had to be properly prepared – the blood drained out of it – the flesh taken off.

That was a living creature until it was prepared according to instructions given in Leviticus 17:10-11, where the Lord says: "I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood..." (NRSV) Blood was to be used on the altar for atonement, not to be consumed as a means of eternal life.

Make no mistake about it – these words of Jesus were shocking for the Jews to hear – the leaders, the people and even the disciples who knew Jesus pretty well.

So what is Jesus saying here? Let’s think about what I’ve said so far: Jesus uses language that is rough, that sounds terrible, really. He uses words like chomp and chew, which involves tearing and spending time making an effort to ingest that which we are eating.

He says we should drink his blood. He says he is the Living Bread. He does not say he is about to die. He says everyone who eats and drinks of him will live. Will actually abide in him and he in them.

So, what happens when we eat something? We take a bite and we chew it up. (My chiropractor grandfather – a health nut before it was popular – said you should chew your food – each bite – at least 60 times!)

So when we eat food, we take it into ourselves and we digest it and that same food, if it’s healthy, goes to work to sustain and energize and satisfy and nourish and fill up our selves so that we can live a healthy life.

In the same way, if we eat junk food, we know what happens there eventually – or *can* happen to most people if that is the only diet they eat – they get fat, they run out of steam, they can’t focus, they get sick easily. It reminds me of a documentary I watched about juicing fruits and veggies. It was titled “Fat, Sick and Nearly Dead.”¹

¹ Joe Cross, www.fatsickandnearlydead.com

It really, in a sense, is true, isn't it? We are what we eat. And to go along with the guy's title of Eat, Drink and be Jesus – we are *who* we eat, theologically speaking.

Jesus uses this eating and drinking language to drive home how it is that we take him in to us so he abides in us and we abide in him.

But think about all the other things around us that we consume and how those things truly consume us. Jill Duffield, who wrote an interesting and helpful commentary on this text for the Presbyterian Outlook, says this:

Jesus Christ abides in us and therefore we abide in Jesus Christ. Where Jesus is, we are also. Where we are, Jesus is also...

Consider what it is that we consume and what consumes us, other than Jesus Christ. The list is long, the ways we live unwisely varied and diverse. We are consumers in a consumer culture. We consume what we are relentlessly sold and it therefore consumes us.

We consume anger, vengeance, guilt, fear and therefore those things consume us. We consume toxic substances, media and so much more and therefore those things consume us. We consume envy and it consumes us.

The list is long, but none of it is ultimate. That's the incredible ramification of the truth of Word becoming flesh. In the words of Psalm 111, God is ever mindful of the covenant and therefore even when we choose badly we are nonetheless God's chosen.²

This is about having life. Jesus is living flesh and blood creature who relates to us. Who is like us, yet is God with Us. As John states in the very beginning of this gospel: “The Word (Jesus) became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:14)

This is a de-sanitized, fully descriptive – symbolic – version of what Jesus did to give us life. His flesh was torn, his blood was shed, but he isn't saying I will do this so you can die with me.

No, he is saying if you consume me, if you let me fill you up, let me be the one thing that consumes you – your heart, your mind, your body, your spirit – then, you will be so much a part of me and I of you, that you will be with me wherever I am and I will be with you wherever you are.

Oh yea, another title came to mind – “Hanging out in High Places With Jesus.”

As Karoline Lewis wrote in her commentary on workingpreacher.com:

² Jill Duffield, Presbyterian Outlook, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Aug. 16, 2015

“... life according to John means that what you need for your life to be sustained, God provides, that life is abundant (10:10), that eternal life is not something you can conveniently and conventionally postpone to your future but is your promise in the present, that any claim about life with Jesus, life with God, means an abiding, a unity, a reciprocity, and oneness. It means real relationship, here and now, life that is not a remembrance of Jesus’ past life or a hope for a future life but life lived in the moment as God’s grace upon grace (1:16).”³

And Jesus said: By eating my flesh and drinking my blood you enter into me and I into you. In the same way that the fully alive Father sent me here and I live because of him, so the one who makes a meal of me lives because of me. This is the Bread from heaven. Your ancestors ate bread and later died. Whoever eats this Bread will live always.”⁴ (The Message)

Chew on that – and live!

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³ Karoline Lewis, www.workingpreacher.com 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Aug 16, 2015

⁴ Eugene Peterson, The Message, John 6:57-58