

August 19 – Pentecost +13

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Kings+2%3A10-12%2C+3%3A3-14&version=NRSV>

Ephesians 5:15-20

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+5:15-20>

John 6:51-58

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+6:51-58>

There's a good chance that you've heard this passage from the gospel before, either directly or some version of it referenced: eating the flesh of the Son of Man, and drinking his blood. In a way these words become familiar, especially around communion, but what do we really think when we read them or hear them? How do you think someone less familiar with these words might react if they heard them? And furthermore, would they think this has any bearing on our everyday lives? How does eating flesh and drinking blood impact us here and now? Perhaps even hearing me say these words, isolated from its text, falls strangely on your ears.

In the first century some people identified the early Christians as incestuous cannibals; people who call each other brother and sister, even their own spouses, and gather early in the morning to drink blood secretly. It's no wonder they were viewed suspiciously. But let's go back to the reading itself. I'm sure some people today would react the same way as those who first heard Jesus' words. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" What is Jesus talking about?

I think we have to back up just a little bit, and reframe this passage as one part in this ongoing narrative we see in John 6. The first part of the chapter is the feeding of the 5000, when Jesus takes five loaves of bread and two fish and feeds the crowds. Afterward Jesus withdraws with His disciples to Capernaum, and the crowd later follows, continuing to look for Jesus. When they find Him they ask questions, and Jesus teaches the people more about His identity, and His purpose.

They ask, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? – And this is just after Jesus fed 5000 people with a simple lunch – anyway they ask, what work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness when they left Egypt. And Jesus says to them, "It wasn't Moses who gave the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

And back then, like today, there were skeptics. Some of the people said isn't this Jesus, the son of Joseph? We know His parents, how can He say that He's come down from heaven? And in today's reading they ask, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus insists that He is the bread of life, the living bread from heaven, and whoever eats this bread will live forever. And this bread is Jesus' flesh.

Which brings us to our reading today. Even though we've reviewed the earlier parts of this chapter, and have a better sense for our passage, we might still wonder what this all means. What does this talk of flesh and blood, and heavenly bread, even the Lord's Supper, what does it really mean? And what does it have to do with us, here and now, two thousand years later?"¹

First let me say that if you're confused, or even skeptical yourself, that doesn't make you a bad Christian. These are difficult concepts and readings to digest and interpret. When we end this passage next week we'll see how some people respond to Jesus' words, but there's a difference between exploring and wanting to understand – even if it's really difficult – and throwing out or disregarding because it doesn't come to us easily. Remember the references to wisdom in our first two readings.

And when we come to a passage like today's we have a choice – to explore and seek a different kind of wisdom, or throw it away and consider it too absurd to be true. We can look for controversies, or inconsistencies, and we can also look for counsel and comfort. And, still yet, we can come to the text looking for meaning, meaning which makes an impact on how we live. And like the crowd in today's lesson, we can grow frustrated with Jesus' abstract words about eating and drinking his body and blood, we might consider it divine wisdom or common foolishness, we can think of it as a controversial statement, or as one that gives some kind of new meaning.²

But when we take these verses, along with the previous ones in John 6, we begin to recognize a bigger picture and just what is at stake here: that God would send Jesus to us, this living bread, to show us how important we are to God, and how much God loves us. In these verses, Jesus offers His very self, His own flesh and blood, everything that He has, is given to us as nourishment.³ And perhaps, even still, hearing Christ's body being nourishment for us still sounds kind of strange. It doesn't fit with our reasoning, or understanding, and it also might sound a little gross, more like cannibalism than Christianity.⁴ But let's also consider what it means for Jesus to be living bread.

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven" and if we unpack the second-half of that sentence, then we see God who takes on flesh, becomes just like us, so that we might believe in God and be joined together for eternity.⁵ Earlier in verse 40 says, "This is indeed the

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-12-b-meeting-the-carnal-god/> (DJL)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life.” God loves us so much that God is willing to create the potential for us to have eternal life.

In Jesus, God takes on flesh; in Jesus, we have the living bread; and in the sacraments we meet God who gives all that God has to offer, so that we might encounter God and believe, and enjoy God’s presence forever. One commentary writes that “flesh and blood” is a Hebrew phrase which refers to the whole person, hearts mind, spirit, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, everything.

If we interpret the text this way then we see Jesus giving us everything that He has...for our sake. Here the wholeness of God’s heart, spirit, love, grace, hope, everything, meets the wholeness of us and the entirety of humanity.⁶ This is what is at the center of our reading. God is willing to do anything to get the message across that God loves us and wants us to believe. After sending prophets, laws, judges, commandments, God enters into the world as Jesus and gives us all the He has. And in order to get His message across, Jesus uses all sorts of metaphors and analogies to let us know about this love and care. Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep; he is the vine and we are the branches; he abides in God and we abide in him. We consume Christ, so that Jesus might dwell in us and fill us. This is the part that gets beyond abstract imagery. This is the promise which God makes to us in the Sacraments: to be one with us forever, to accompany us in all times, and in all situations, no matter what.⁷ When we take part in this heavenly bread there is a much richer meaning and experience of unity, closeness, and oneness with God. I said earlier that we can look to the biblical texts for meaning, and we can find meaning here, in understanding the depth and extent to which God loves us – willing to give up everything to help us know just how much we are loved. And there’s also the experiential part – the part that goes beyond knowing and includes feeling. The experience of sharing in God’s gift to us transcends time, even though almost 2000 years have passed.

The living bread offered to us changes everything. Living bread gives us hope that someday we will be joined with God in wholeness and eternal life; and until then, here and now, the living bread is broken and given to us, joining us in our brokenness accompanying us through the highs and lows of life.

Eating flesh and drinking blood sounds strange, but it’s another way of saying that in Jesus, God has given us everything, emptying Himself for our sake so that we might believe that Jesus is who He claims to be, the living bread of heaven, sent by God to let us know that God wants to be with us forever. And this isn’t just a promise for a time that is yet to come, but it’s also a promise for the here and now. In our lives of brokenness and hurt, of pain and sorrow, we find wholeness and healing through God’s grace. When we choose to partake in living bread, it’s an experience that goes beyond traditional knowledge or understanding. There’s an encounter with the divine, and a whole-body understanding that God loves us and wants to be joined with us, so that we can abide in God, and God can abide in us.

⁶ DJL

⁷ Ibid.

The table is prepared, the bread of heaven has come down, and living bread is offered to us. If you wish, please come and share this living bread, maybe for the first time, or the first time in a long time, but always know that God will be with you, loving you, giving everything for you until you're ready to give everything in return. Amen.