

Sunday, August 15, 2021
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15 (Year B)

John 6.51-58

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/874365536513620>

(Sermon begins at about 20:55)

“You Are What You Eat”

They say, “you are what you eat.” This phrase, or at least the concept, has been around in secular culture for quite a while. It has its origins in a French gastronomic essay published in 1826. While the actual phrase wasn’t used, the theme of the essay was that the food one eats has a bearing on one’s physical health and state of mind. The actual phrase did not enter English usage until the 1930s. There was then a resurgence with the hippy era of the 1960s, and it has been in popular usage ever since.¹

Now this primarily relates to what we eat as influencing our physical and mental wellbeing. But what about our spiritual wellbeing? In a way, the original espouser of the concept of “you are what you eat” was not the author of a gastronomic essay in 19th century France, but Jesus Christ in first century Judea. This concept is really the essence of today’s Gospel reading. Particularly Jesus’ statement, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (Jn 6.56). While quite familiar to us today, even comforting, Jesus’ words would have been strange to the original hearers. In fact, they would have been downright disgusted by what they heard.

Today’s Gospel reading is a continuation of Jesus’ Bread of Life Discourse. As we have established over the last couple of weeks, the hearers of Jesus’ words have a hard time getting what he’s talking about. As Jesus attempts to explain what he means in saying “I am the bread of life,” he begins to bump up against deeply held religious norms, making his original audience uncomfortable. He says that to have eternal life, they need the bread of life. All well and good. He then explains that this bread is his flesh. And that they need to eat his body and drink his blood. This is where they freak out, so to speak. “What? Eat his flesh? Drink his blood? That’s just gross!”

For first century Jews, this imagery certainly would have been repugnant. Eating human flesh was bad enough. But the thought of drinking the blood of any creature would have been unthinkable. Because the blood was thought to contain the life’s energy, the soul. To drink blood would have meant taking in the soul of that creature, making it one with the person. The life essence of the creature would take over and become the life essence of the person. This was unnatural, not to mention that it rendered the person ritually impure.

In using this imagery, Jesus is asking his audience to set aside and rethink their deeply held beliefs. To think outside the box, as it were. He is telling them that to gain eternal life, they need to make his soul, his being, part of themselves. To allow that which is divine to touch

them in a very personal way, to become part of who they are. In this way, they will connect with God in a more intimate way, giving them new and eternal life. "You are what you eat."

Of course, today we recognize the deeper meaning of what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." It has deep significance for what is the central act of our worship experience: Holy Communion. While not directly related to an account of the Last Supper, we recognize, following the events of the Last Supper and Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, that Jesus' words are an invitation to communion, as part of our remembrance of the Last Supper, the sacrament of the Eucharist.

As I noted several weeks ago, unlike the other three Gospels, John's Gospel does not contain an institution of the Lord's Supper. The only thing we hear of the Last Supper is Jesus washing his disciples' feet and a lengthy discourse in which he gives them final instructions before his crucifixion. The section of the Gospel we heard this morning contains what is probably the closest thing to an invitation to the holy meal in John's Gospel. It was not until after his death and resurrection that the meaning of Jesus' words would truly be understood, and only in light of Holy Communion.

In this we see what we refer to as the Real Presence of Christ. In the Eucharistic Prayer, we recognize that the bread becomes Christ's body. We recognize that the wine becomes Christ's blood. How this happens is truly a mystery. How this continues to be bread while also being the body of Christ. How this continues to be wine while also being the blood of Christ. It is a mystery of faith.

This is best understood when we recognize Eucharist for what it is: a sacramental act. According to the Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer*, a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace." The Catechism goes on to say that a sacrament is "given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace."² Eucharist being one of the two sacraments instituted by Jesus himself. In the Eucharist, the outward and visible sign is "the bread and wine, given and received according to Christ's command." The inward grace is the "Body and Blood of Christ given to his people, and received by faith."³ This inward grace represents the love and forgiveness of God freely given, the gift of eternal life that Jesus promises through his death and resurrection. This inward grace brings about "the strengthening of our union with Christ and with one another." This inward grace is "the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life."⁴

What happens in this sacrament is further explained in Martin Luther's Small Catechism, where Luther asks the question, "How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing?" Answer: "Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: 'given for you' and 'shed for you for the forgiveness of sin.' These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes these very words has what they declare and state."⁵ In other words, it is not just the consuming of the bread and wine, but the believing in the words that what is being consumed is the body of Christ given for us and the blood of Christ shed for us, that, together, provide the spiritual benefit of what Christ offers.

But wait, there's more. In writing on the sacrament of communion and the relationship between the sacraments and the sacramental nature of the Christian life, Lutheran pastor and scholar Jan Schnell Rippentrop notes that the sacraments allow us to enter into and empower us to live out the sacramentality that is the essence of Christian existence—that the grace we receive through the sacraments, we intentionally live out in the world. She writes, “the sacramentality of life is the breath of Christian life—life that springs from the sacraments.”⁶ This means the sacrament of the Eucharist does not end with consuming the bread and the wine. There is another outward and visible sign that comes into play at the moment we consume the body and blood of Christ. And this goes back to the Jewish understanding of blood containing the essence of life.

In a way, this perception is still operative in our understanding of what happens at communion. What is important is what happens when we eat the bread and drink the wine. When we take these into our body, we are taking in the body of Christ. We are taking in the blood of Christ. As Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10.16).

Just as our Jewish ancestors believed that ingesting the blood of another being imparted the life essence of that being, so too do we take in the life essence of Jesus in our partaking of communion. This is what Jesus means when he says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” His life essence abides in us, lives in us, energizing us, making his life essence our own. Not only do we receive eternal life through his abiding in us. We are changed, made new, to live in new ways. We begin to live in him, for him. Our physical body becomes his physical body here and now, to be used for his purposes. In consuming the body of Christ, we become the Body of Christ.

One of the key aspects of Jesus' Bread of Life Discourse, particularly the part we hear today, is the fact that Jesus intentionally bumps up against the deeply held religious norms of his audience, making them uncomfortable. He is asking them to rethink how they view their life of faith. He is asking them to rethink their relationship with God. He is asking them to rethink how they demonstrate their faith in their daily lives. He is asking them to think outside the box. He is asking them to live outside the box. Two thousand years later, that has not changed. Even today, even though we have a different understanding than our Jewish ancestors of what it means to eat his flesh and drink his blood, Jesus is still asking us to rethink what that means. He is telling us that to eat his flesh and drink his blood means that he will and does abide in us and we in him. He lived his whole life outside the box of what his society dictated as the norm. If he abides in us and we in him, we are called to do likewise. Because we are what we eat.

¹ “You are what you eat,” The Phrase Finder, August 13, 2021. <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/you-are-what-you-eat.html>.

² *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1979), 857.

³ *Ibid.*, 859.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 860.

⁵ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 1166.

⁶ Jan Schnell Rippentrop, “Ready for Communion: Living in Holy Space,” *Christian Century*, August 19, 2015: 30.