

Sunday, August 18, 2024
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15B)

John 6.51-58

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Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1160630851683863>

(Sermon begins at about 21:05)

“Those Who Eat My Flesh and Drink My Blood Abide in Me, and I in Them”

Throughout the “Bread of Life Discourse” which we have been examining the last couple of weeks, Jesus’ comments become increasingly provocative, to say the least:

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (Jn 6.27).

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (Jn 6.35).

“I am the bread that came down from heaven” (Jn 6.41).

“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” (Jn 6.51).

This last statement being the bridge between last week’s Gospel reading and today’s. A statement that certainly causes a great deal of consternation, if not revulsion, on the part of his original audience, who by now are pretty agitated. And rightly so because of the cannibalistic implications of the most recent pronouncements. As if that is not enough, as if he couldn’t get any more provocative, Jesus takes it to a whole other level: “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.” The idea of eating human flesh was disgusting enough. But adding to that the idea of “drinking his blood” was beyond the pale. The idea of consuming blood—the blood of any animal—was a transgression of the most fundamental taboos in Jewish dietary laws. Laws given by God himself. So not only is the very notion just so unthinkable and repulsive, to have such words uttered by a man claiming to be sent by God, to have come down from heaven, was just over-the-top. And yet, he keeps going from there. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.” Further explaining. And undoubtedly, further upsetting his audience.

Departing from last week’s sermon on the literal implications of Jesus being the bread who came down from heaven, in today’s passage Jesus is not speaking literally of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Rather, he is foreshadowing the sacrament of the Eucharist, of Holy Communion, of the Lord’s Supper. Which does beg the question about transubstantiation and other theories of the Real Presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements, but that is a conversation for another day. Before I get too far ahead of myself, let’s take a step back and look at context.

The three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all place the institution of the sacrament of the eucharist in the context of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples on Maundy Thursday. An event that is further referenced by the Apostle Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11.23-26). The account which is the basis for the prayer of consecration during our celebration of eucharist.

Despite references to the Last Supper as the institution of the eucharist, the Gospel According to John does not specifically have such an account. John does reference Jesus' final meal with his disciples, although really saying nothing about the meal itself, instead focusing on the washing of the disciples' feet. And yet, John does not ignore the institution of the eucharistic meal. Instead, he places it in a different context, earlier in his Gospel. The "Bread of Life Discourse," and particularly the last section that we heard today, serves as John's eucharistic discourse—John's version of the institution of the eucharist, as it were.

Admittedly, what we hear in the "Bread of Life Discourse" is not the full account of the institution of the eucharist. The "Bread of Life Discourse" serves as the theological explanation, provided after the fact. So, if that's the case, where did the actual eucharistic meal occur? Think back to what happened before Jesus began delivering this discourse, to the event that prompted his explanation of himself as the bread that gives eternal life. In John's Gospel, the feeding of the five thousand is the performative act, the actual institution of eucharist. As we are told regarding that event, "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated" (Jn 6.11a). Incorporating the classic formula used to describe what happens when we make eucharist: take, bless, break, give. The bread, having been presented by the people, is taken by the presider. The bread is then blessed, the act in which the bread is imbued with the Real Presence of Christ. The consecrated bread is broken—a practical matter for purposes of distribution, but even more so a symbolic representation of how Jesus' own body was broken on the cross. And then, the consecrated bread is given to the people. The only thing missing from this account as compared with the Synoptics are words of instruction or explanation. That comes later, in the "Bread of Life Discourse."

John's lack of an account of the Last Supper and the resulting institution of eucharist was not an oversight. Rather, it was intentional. John places his eucharistic discourse in the context of all of Jesus' life and ministry, not just his Passion. Not just a single event at the end of Jesus' earthly life. As one commentary on the theological implications of John's eucharistic discourse notes: "To share in the eucharistic meal is not to remember or commemorate one particular event, but is to share in all of Jesus' life, including ultimately his death. Participation in the eucharist creates a relationship between Jesus and the believer: 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them' (6.56)." A relationship that "contains within it the promise of new life: 'Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me' (6.57)."¹

Perhaps John's lack of a formalized institution of the Lord's Supper, placing it instead in the context of Jesus' overall life and ministry, and the resulting theology of eucharist, says something about the centrality of eucharist to our lives of faith. Providing a fuller explanation of what eucharist truly is meant to be. All the other accounts—those in the Synoptic Gospels, as well as Paul's account in First Corinthians—merely report the actual event of the Last Supper. In all instances, Jesus refers to the bread as his body and the wine as his blood. And Matthew notes that the wine is the "blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26.28). Beyond that, there is no discussion of what this sacrament is meant to signify; what it is meant to accomplish.

It is only in John's description of the eucharist, placed in the course of Jesus' everyday life, the context of his ministry, that we have a more robust explanation of what eucharist truly means. Hear again the explanation Jesus provides to his original audience:

"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 . . . the one who eats this bread will live forever."

Certainly, these words affirm our understanding of Christ as the means by which we have received eternal life. As he says, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day." The promise of eternal life that is only made possible through the giving of his flesh and his blood. Through his death whereby his flesh is broken and his blood is spilled. And through his subsequent resurrection whereby he breaks the bonds that sin had on humanity. Whereby he breaks the bonds that death had on humanity. The result being a new life in which our sins are forgiven and we are invited into a new life in ongoing relationship with God in the here and now and extending beyond this limited earthly existence into life everlasting.

The key in all of this is that this eternal life is not just something in the future. It is here and now. And just as eucharist points to that future life, it is also a means of grounding our lives of faith in the present. These words tell us that eucharist is meant to be the source of our life in Jesus. That eucharist is meant to be that which provides the foundation for our lives and ministries, just as John places eucharist in the context of Jesus' overall life and ministry. That it is eucharist that nourishes us and provides us with what we need for ministry in his name. It is in the physical act of eating the bread and drinking the wine—the bread that becomes his body, the wine that becomes his blood—in which we are nourished. As Jesus says, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." By partaking of the bread and the wine, Christ's body becomes a part of our own bodies. In turn, our bodies become a part of his body. That's at least part of what we mean when we refer to ourselves as the Body of Christ. That we are those who take in the Body of Christ, becoming the Body of Christ, enabling us to carry on Christ's work in the world. Work that is in and of itself eucharistic; work that is life-giving.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1920.