

**Sunday, August 25, 2024**  
**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16B)**

John 6.56-69

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1063065791829373>

*(Sermon begins at about 22:00)*

**“Invited into Spirit and Life”**

For the last three weeks we have talked about Jesus’ “Bread of Life Discourse.” The overall discourse spans a total of 38 verses. A pretty hefty chunk of scripture. Certainly more than can really be digested at one time—particularly considering that it is the Gospel according to John, which is, in general, very dense theologically. Wisely, the framers of our lectionary chose to divide it up into bite-sized chunks. Each section containing valuable insights into who Jesus is. Each week we have gone deeper and deeper, with Jesus revealing himself first as the Son of Man, then as the bread of life, then as the living bread that came down from heaven, then as the one who gives eternal life.

While we have had the luxury of taking the bread of life imagery in more manageable portions, Jesus’ original audience did not have that option. They had it thrown at them all at once. Like drinking from a firehose. No wonder then, that today, following Jesus’ wrap-up of the “Bread of Life Discourse,” we hear his audiences’ response as being “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Not, “Good job, Jesus. Great explanation. You really nailed it! Now we totally understand who you are and why you were sent by God.” Instead, it is more along the lines of, “What? What are you talking about? We don’t get it.”

While we have the benefit of knowing the broader story and being privy to Jesus’ endgame, his original audience was not. While he tried to bring them along, building on his various images of himself with each passing section of his discourse, it was just too much for some to process. Particularly as he got deeper and deeper into the imagery, culminating with the opening words of today’s section: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Certainly the cannibalistic implications would have been virtually impossible for them to accept. But aside from that, even the image of abiding in him and he in them would not have made a lot of sense to them. And yet, that particular statement is the ultimate point of this whole discourse. All that build-up, to try to bring them along, and they still don’t understand what Jesus is really getting at. Instead of a mic-drop, it’s more like a belly-flop. At least on the surface.

Those who sought out and were following Jesus were quick to accept him when he was giving out free bread and fish at the feeding of the five thousand. But when he took that opportunity to try to teach them a broader message about God’s love and their own relationships with God—all demonstrated through the Incarnation, through the fact that he is the bread of life that came down from heaven—they start to question. They start to wonder. They start to reconsider if following Jesus is worth it.

Perhaps the problem was that they wanted easy answers. Strike that. What they wanted was free bread. But Jesus saw that there was a hunger beyond the merely physical, beyond the hunger for food. There was a fundamental hunger that we all experience. The hunger for deeper connection with God. Part of the problem for Jesus' original audience—and perhaps for us, as well—is the difficulty in seeing beyond the immediate, physical needs. While they may not have asked for it, Jesus was bound and determined to use their physical hunger as a symbol for their deeper hunger; to use their physical hunger as a starting point to help them see their deeper hunger. And, in turn, to see how he can meet that deeper hunger.

When they got more than they initially sought, when they got more than a little bread, when they were invited to partake of what Jesus truly had to offer—his life given for them, his life given to provide them with eternal life—many began to question what this was all about. After all, Jesus was using images unlike any they had ever heard. In so doing, he was challenging them to look at their lives and at their relationship with God in a completely new way. A completely different way. So, yeah, they were understandably confused. They were understandably struggling with trying to make sense of what Jesus was saying. And as is often the case, when something is difficult, when something is challenging, when something is different from what we know and are comfortable with, it is tempting to reject it out-of-hand.

Based on Jesus' observation, there was a range of responses on the part of those present. He notes that there was complaining about him and his teachings. He notes there were some who just could not bring themselves to believe what he had to say. He notes that there were even some who outright rejected him and what he had to offer. While there were those who were complaining, those who were having a hard time believing, those who were completely giving up, Jesus was not giving up. He's still looking for the right images, the right words, to convey who he is and what he has to offer. He needed to find a way to get to the heart of the matter. To help them see this was about them and their relationship with God. To connect the human with the divine. Which meant he needed to meet them where they were in their physical need and find a way to connect their physical need with the deeper, spiritual need.

It is apparent to Jesus that he needs to move beyond the imagery of bread, beyond the imagery of flesh and blood as a means to eternal life. He needs to get back to basics. Back to the root of the problem in the first place. The essence of what is keeping them from fuller and deeper relationship with their God. The dichotomy, the barrier, between flesh and spirit. As Jesus tells them, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." In other words, he is abolishing their previous either/or thinking of human vs divine, of flesh vs spirit. Rather, he is offering the coming together, the union, of flesh and spirit; the enspiriting of the flesh. The joining of human and divine. Just as Jesus himself is the Son of God, is the Word made flesh, is God Incarnate. He is not either/or, but is both/and. He is offering that to the rest of us, as well. Not exactly the same way, but a coming together nonetheless. To be the fleshly beings that we are yet enlivened and energized by the Spirit. That is what he means when he offers eternal life—ongoing life in God's presence. The coming together of our human life in direct relationship and connection with the divine life that is God.

Setting aside momentarily the "eat my flesh and drink my blood" part that is so problematic for his original audience, this is what he means when he refers to "those who . . . abide in me, and I

in them.” That through him, we are brought into the relationship between flesh and spirit, between human and divine. A connection that is truly life-giving. As one commentator explains this connection, “Keeping the flesh together with the spirit requires us to live deeply, appreciating our interdependence and interconnectedness with the Creator, the creation, and our fellow creatures. By inviting us to eat and drink of his whole person, Jesus challenges us to risk living incarnationally, becoming whole in flesh and spirit, as the means of our salvation.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, being open to seeing ourselves in a new way. As the coming together, as the integration of the physical and the spiritual as an inseparable whole. Just as the human and divine are inseparable in the person of Jesus.

What Jesus is essentially offering, what he is inviting his audience—and us—into is the means of becoming more fully who we are created to be. He is offering and inviting those who follow him to explore those ways in which they—in which we—can connect with our true nature. The physical and the spiritual. That we do this by exploring and seeking to deepen our relationship with the God from whom we derive our life, our strength, and our purpose. Or, as we hear in the Acts of the Apostles, the One in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17.28).

This was the fundamental message Jesus was seeking to convey to his followers. This is what it means that we abide in him and he in us. While this may be a simple concept, the reaction of Jesus’ original audience demonstrates that it is not easy to live into. At least not initially. It takes a lot of practice. We get some indication of this at the end of today’s pericope. In apparent frustration that so many of his followers were abandoning him, “Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’” Simon Peter, speaking on behalf of the twelve, those who have been with Jesus from the beginning; those who have experienced Jesus in far deeper ways than any others, responds: “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.” Such beautiful and poetic words that are at once an expression of their experience of Jesus and a profession of faith. “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

In their time with him, the twelve have seen more than most just who Jesus is, what he has accomplished, and what he has to offer. They have witnessed firsthand who he is. They have experienced firsthand who he is. Believing in Jesus as the Holy One of God is not just a statement of faith but is a lived experience. One that strengthens and deepens with each passing day.

And so it is for us. As those who follow Jesus this side of the resurrection. As those who have devoted our lives to following Jesus; to being members of the Body of Christ. As those who seek to abide in him, just as we know that he abides in us.

As I discussed last week, for the Church, which is the inheritor of and tasked with living more fully into Jesus’ teachings that are spirit and life, one central way we embody this belief is through Eucharist. That every time we make Eucharist, we bring together flesh and spirit in a tangible way through the Real Presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine, becoming flesh and blood. In the eating of the bread become flesh and the drinking of the wine become blood, we abide in Christ and he in us.

I will close with the words of one commentator, who beautifully summarizes the meaning of today's Gospel and most notably, what it means to our lives of faith: "The metaphor of corporeal consumption in this passage, interpreted ritually in the Eucharist, reveals John's theological understanding of God as the divine community reflected in the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son, Christ and God, Jesus and believer, and believer and God, all through the power of the Spirit. Just as Jesus is the incarnation of God, so we as believers are invited to be part of that divine body, to be the incarnation of Christ in and to the world."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Loye Bradley Ashton, "John 6:56-69, Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary – Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 382-384 (emphasis mine).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.