

John 6

Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³²Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵Jesus 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. ⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I 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." ⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" ⁵³So Jesus said to them, "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. ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

Imagine a hypothetical tourist from Mars who'd memorized a decent English dictionary but had little other exposure to Earth was church shopping today and heard the words from the Gospel of John today. "*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.*" He would be pretty sure we were all cannibals. He would steal wondering glances at the kind lady who helped him find his place in the hymnal; could such a sweet lady possibly be in on all this? He would probably not stay for coffee hour.

Try to put yourself in those first century sandals. Here is Jesus saying unless you eat this flesh and drink this blood, you cannot have life within you. It is a shocking and graphic statement in many ways. No wonder early Christians were accused of human sacrifice/cannibalism – with rumors about their beliefs on the streets: "*They meet to eat flesh and drink blood*". These accusations were cited as cause for persecution - after all, what civilized society would tolerate such behavior?

We need to remember that the temple Jesus knew was soaked in blood. *In those times everyone, Jew or Gentile, would have been familiar with the offering of burnt sacrifices.* Daily sacrifices of animals happened in the temple at Jerusalem as well as in pagan temples in Corinth or Rome. If one day someone perfects time travel and then asks you to be on the altar guild in the temple, don't do it. Instead of dealing with flower arrangements, you would be handling animal sacrifices.

Only a token of the sacrificial animal would be burned. A portion was reserved for the priests and the remainder would be shared by guests at a feast. William Barclay, a New Testament scholar says *that in pagan rituals, the host at the feast was believed to be the god to whom the sacrifice has been offered, not the person making the offering. The god was believed to have entered into the flesh, so that by eating it, the guests would be taking the god into himself or herself. Thus when the feast was over, the guests left the table convinced that they were now god-filled.* However, strange that may seem to us, John was telling his audience that Jesus had given himself as a sacrifice for them in the same manner. His body broken and his blood shed on the cross - symbols in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. He was not only with them, he was in them.

If you read the gospel according to John, there is no institution of the Last Supper, as there is in the other three gospels. John's account of the night he was betrayed offers the ritual of washing the disciples' feet, not the institution of the Lord's Supper. But this absence is not an indication that John has overlooked or ignored it. Rather, it moves through the gospel, with its frequent references to Jesus as the "bread of life". For John, all of Jesus' life, rather than one particular event at the end of his life, "institutes" the sacrament of the Holy Communion. In the "I am" sayings of John 6, Jesus says that he is the food that gives life.

With the distance of 2000 years, it is, easy to hear the words of today's Gospel and allow its meaning to pass us by. We are conditioned to the language from our liturgy of Holy Communion. In fact, many of us have celebrated Holy Communion our entire lives. And for some of us, the feast we share together has lost mystery altogether. There are moments in our lives when we need to place ourselves in the longing of the crowd that followed Jesus. And what was Jesus really trying to say to them.

Jesus is speaking to a large crowd that sought him out; that made a pilgrimage into the wilderness to find him; that were fed by him from only five fish and two loaves of bread. Bread accounted for 50% of the calories eaten each day by those who followed Jesus; each day's food was earned that day; and was just enough to survive for a day; bread was life. Jesus is speaking to a crowd that felt the pangs of some deep longing and glimpsed the possibilities of some true satisfaction in Jesus. They follow Jesus in hopes of more good things to come. Of course, they, like us, come seeking tangible evidence. They want full bellies, relief from oppression, someone they can believe in and follow.

Jesus wants them to see that their true longing is for "bread," **LIVING** bread. Jesus understood the ways that the hungers of the body and the hungers of the soul intertwine, and how both are at play when it comes to food. Jesus is clear in asking us to discern the difference between what fills the belly and what fills the soul. Jesus wants us to SEE that our real longing is not for things that pass away. Our true longing is for things that endure, imperishable:

Light, truth, life, love, loyalty, kinship, abiding in God,
Hearing and responding to God's voice / God's call.

We tend to be spiritually anorexic....starve ourselves of spiritual nourishment. Like an anorexic, we must learn again how to feel hunger! Jesus is teaching us where we can find food for our spiritual hunger. We all eat, but are we conscious of what we eat. We are already in a relationship with God, but are we conscious of it? Spirituality is becoming conscious of that relationship.

In 1943, food writer, M F.K. Fisher wrote a book, **The Gastronomical Me** that captured the dynamic between hungers of body and soul, and how the feeding of each are bound together. In the introduction to her book, she writes, *"People ask me: Why do you write about food, and eating and drinking? The easiest answer is to say that, like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more than that. It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it...and then the fine reality of hunger satisfied...it is all one. There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk. And that is my answer, when people ask me: Why do you write about hunger, and not wars or love?"*

Simone Weil, who wrote, in her book **Waiting for God**, *"The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry."*

Those who try to understand these words literally, won't get it. These words offer a vision that we might see what it is that will feed / sustain / nourish / develop into maturity our deep longing. When Jesus invites us to eat his flesh and drink his blood, he is inviting us to ingest God's Word, to feast on God's light, God's life, God's truth, God's love. When Jesus invites us to eat his flesh and drink his blood, he invites us to be healed of our ancient wound and to live once again in ways that truly satisfy our deepest longing.

Jesus knew that people wanted a quick fix and easy answer, instead of entering into the mystery with heart and soul open to receiving the new life that discipleship could bring. We are invited, again and again, to enter the mystery of how an incarnate God becomes real food for those who hunger. Like all great mysteries, the teaching is meant to be entered into and lived rather than intellectualized. In the words of theologians Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos, *"We can never grasp a mystery; we can only allow ourselves to be grasped by it. That kind of surrender ... is needed if we are ever to receive the gift of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist."* The great mystery lives in a place beyond language As Christians we are called to be Christ's body; Jesus assures us that by consuming his body we too are consumed, and transformed, so that we in turn can transform the world—from death to life, despair to hope, exclusion to welcome, and judgment to mercy.

What was shocking seems not so strange now. We hear these words and are able to move through and beyond them. We lift our hands willingly for the morsel of bread that strengthens us for the journey and affirms Jesus' promise of life eternal. We welcome the bread and wine. If the gospel we live is going to be truly transformative, so must be the food that sustains us. Living bread is a part of our tradition, our spiritual practice. We know what to do and what to expect each Communion Sunday when called to the altar for this holy meal.

What are you hungry for these days?

May Jesus, the Bread of Life, who knew the pleasures of the table, feed you well in these days. Amen.