

“Eat and Live!”

When I first read today's Gospel lesson, I was reminded of a time when I was smacked as a child. I had broken a cardinal rule regarding table manners. When food is placed in front of you, never say in a disgusted voice, “What is this? This is gross?” ... especially if you are a guest at one of your parent's friend's house! Upon hearing Jesus say eat my flesh and drink my blood ... questions immediately surfaced. Eat flesh? Drink blood? Yak! What is this? So I dusted off some old commentaries and began to dig ... making like the character from this year's VBS ... Dr. Dig! I disagreed with a lot of the material I read. Most people interpret this passage as a formula for the Last Supper ... a Eucharistic teaching by Jesus. Since the Last Supper is not mentioned in the Gospel of John like the other Gospels (John has only the foot washing), folks latch on to this lesson as a strict interpretation of the meaning of the Last Supper even though it is out of place (Jesus is in Galilee, not the Upper Room) and the time is early in his ministry and not at the end.

There is always the danger of interpreting scripture with present eye glasses, looking back, and interpreting scripture from today's traditional and liturgical stand point. One should take off those glasses and simply ask any text, “What is this?” and let the text speak for itself. In fact, I believe our lesson begs the question “Who was Jesus?” Who was this carpenter's son that fed the hungry multitudes, and had the audacity to refer to himself as the “living bread that came down from heaven.” Those listening immediately thought Jesus was referring to that sticky stuff called “manna” that their ancestors were blessed with on their journey through the dessert toward the promise land. Jesus quickly nullifies that thought ... “No, manna only filled their stomachs and satisfied them physically, but they still died ... No, I'm talking about food that when you eat it, you never die!”

Sometimes Jesus can be difficult to understand ... Lord, just say it plainly. Jesus then cranks the conversation up a notch or two with his saying, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” There he goes again with this eating flesh and drinking blood stuff! These are repugnant ideas and allude to cannibalism. No wonder the people who first heard this criticized him and even turned away. In fact, in Greek, it is even more repugnant. The very word translated here as “eat” is actually closer to our words “chew,” or “gnaw,” or “gulp.” “Unless you gnaw on the flesh of the Son of Man and gulp his blood, you have no life in you? What is this? This is gross?”

Now I found that most commentaries soften some the disgusting imagery by saying that Jesus is speaking in metaphor, referring perhaps to the Eucharist. But again, this brings me back to the point that on the last night in the Upper Room John makes no reference to Jesus referring to the bread as his “body” or the wine as his “blood” like the other three Gospels. So I believe there is a problem with this interpretation and to my surprise and delight, John Calvin agrees with me!

I think it is safe to say that today's gospel lesson is one of Jesus' “hard sayings.” There are so many times when Jesus demands hard things of us. “Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor.” That's hard. Or, elsewhere, “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” Or, “Be perfect, even as your father in heaven is perfect.” But, in today's gospel, Jesus doesn't demand anything of us other than our faith. Rather, Jesus makes promises. He tells us that he is the bread that has come down from heaven. He is the bread that will satisfy all our longings. We are to feed on him and we will be satisfied forever. It is ironic that it is the promise of Jesus that offends his disciples rather than any of his demands or commands. Jesus promises us that he is the answer to our deepest hungers, that we are to feed upon him and be filled that he is more to us than food and drink ... he is for us the very Source of life.

Passages like this I think define our real problem with Jesus ... that it is not so much a question of “Who was Jesus?” but rather “Who is Jesus?” May be that is one of the reasons why we spend so much energy on attempts to reconstruct a history of Jesus. If we can make Jesus into an historical figure, a problem of the past, then we don't have to deal with him in the present; we can avoid answering, “Who is Jesus today for us?” Jesus offended those who stood around him that day, and it wasn't that they were simple, gullible, ancient people. It is rather a matter that Jesus is strange.

Take the first chapter of John. If Jesus is the “Word made flesh” as John claims ... God with us ... then we ought not to be surprised when Jesus is not confusing, not mysterious or elusive. After all, we are not gods. Again and again, in John's words, the “light shines in the darkness,” our darkness. Jesus came unto his own and his own did not receive him. It's hard to believe that God really looks and acts and talks like Jesus. So many people were offended by Jesus in the first century, as they are in our own time.

Sometimes I hear people say, "I wish I could have lived in the first century and witnessed for myself the work of Jesus, actually seen him face-to-face." The implication of this desire is that belief would somehow be easier ... that seeing is believing ... that if you could stand face-to-face with who Jesus was it would be easier to choose for yourself who Jesus is today! But if that were the case, why did more people of that day seem to reject Jesus than follow Jesus, if the basis of faith is "seeing-is-believing?" No, our problem is not that we don't have enough evidence to convince us that Jesus is the Savior of the world. Our problem is that Jesus and his teachings can be difficult and demanding here and now. Folks, it is not for us to choose to believe in Jesus on the basis of certain proofs and arguments. It is for Jesus to choose us, to come to us, to call us, to speak to us, to reveal himself to us.

The first disciples did not choose Jesus. He chose them. They were drawn to him. And this is true for us. Last week's lesson makes this plain: *At this time the Jews began to murmur disapprovingly because he said 'I am the bread which came down from heaven.' They said, 'Surely this is Jesus son of Joseph; we know his father and mother. How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"?' Jesus answered, 'Stop murmuring among yourselves. No man can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets: "And they shall all be taught by God." Everyone who has listened to the Father and learned from him comes to me (John 6:41-45).*

Commenting on these verses Rudolf Bultmann writes, "... faith becomes possible when one abandons hold on one's own security, and to abandon one's security is nothing else than to let oneself be drawn by the Father. Moreover, verse 45 (b) shows that this "drawing" is not a magic process, nor is it governed by rigid laws like the laws of nature. It occurs when man abandons his own judgment and "hears" and "learns" from the Father, when he allows God to speak to him. The "drawing" by the Father occurs not, as it were, *behind* man's decision of faith but *in* it. He who comes to Jesus, however, receives the promise, "I will not reject him."

For this very reason, you are here this morning. You are drawn by God who overrides all your desires to be some place else, doing something else. When people ask me how I decided to become a minister, or when did I choose to become a minister, I reply that I did not choose nor did I actually decide. I was drawn into the ministry by God whose Son simply said to me: "Follow me!" If left to my own devices in the summer of 1966, I would have chosen to go to the Peace Corp, or on to Law School, or to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin for a Master of Social Work, all options I considered. But as it turned out, I found myself in September of '66 as a Baptist on a scholarship in a Presbyterian Seminary without a Bible! I can't explain it any better than being "drawn" by God to use me, reluctant and mischievous me, to serve Him as a servant of His Word and Sacrament.

That is the way it is. You are here not because you studied the world's alleged saviors and decided that Jesus had the most to offer. It is not that you assembled all the available historical data and it added up to Jesus. It is rather that Jesus in some way has come to you ... spoken to you ... and you listened and learned ... and he chose you to be his disciple ... you responded. Like the scriptures today, Jesus keeps talking to his disciples (that's us), keeps working with his disciples, and keeps speaking and revealing even when they (we) don't understand everything about him. But understanding is not the issue. The issue is to keep trying to love Jesus, to follow Jesus, to feed on him, to savor and enjoy him as if we were feeding on the "bread of life." Faith in Jesus is not necessarily certitude, firm, or unwavering understanding. Faith is being willing to be in conversation with Jesus, to be drawn by God to Christ even though we do not always understand him.

Today's Gospel lesson may be a "hard saying" but it spells out who Jesus is for us today. Jesus is the bread of life come down to nourish our hearts, our minds, and our souls that we may not die physically or spiritually, but have life now and always! The phrase "flesh and blood" can be an idiom referring to the whole person. I believe Jesus is saying ... eat ... drink ... take all of me into your life. Refresh your mind, your body, and your soul with my ways, my teachings, and my truth ... for I am the (stuff) of life. "Whoever comes to me shall never be hungry and whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty." Eat! Drink!

Sacramental ... Yes ... but more ... At times you may wonder "What is this stuff?" But remember, Jesus is the one who draws you into his fellowship: "Follow me!" Jesus is the one who sets Table ... provides the bread ... offers the invitation. You don't know why for you feel unworthy, but you do know because grace overrides your unworthiness. You are confused and don't understand but you are clear about your needs. You are reluctant and hesitant and often uncommitted, but you are hungry. You are lost in the past and afraid of the future, but today ... today Jesus draws you to himself ... and for the moment ... in this sacred hour ... it is enough ... just enough hope and peace ... so ... we continue to take Jesus in ... we eat and live ... the taste is good ... and that my friends is faith.