

PENTECOST 12
August 16, 2015
John 6:51-58
"You Are What You Eat"
Pastor Saul Stensvaag

Since August 2nd, we've been looking at an extended passage from John's gospel about Jesus as the bread of life from heaven.

Jesus tells the crowds that he is the living bread, and if they believe in him he will raise them to eternal life. Jesus makes some radical statements in this text:

"I am the living bread 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.... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.... They abide in me, and I in them."

Jesus chooses **really gory words** to **describe what he means**. In all the other gospels, he calls this bread his body. But in John's gospel, he calls it his **flesh** — his **skin and muscle tissue**!

In the other gospels, he offers it to be eaten.

But in John's gospel Jesus uses the Aramaic word for "*chomp*" or "*gnaw*," so that a more literal translation of his invitation goes like this: "*Those who chomp my flesh and guzzle my blood have eternal life; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.*"

What a repulsive image!

It's no wonder that, as we'll read in next week's gospel, Jesus' followers began to pull away from him at that point. "*This teaching is difficult,*" they say. "*Who can accept it?*"

Some non-Christians in the second century even accused Christians of being cannibals.

Of course, by now, **we've done such a good job of spiritualizing the image** of eating Christ's body and drinking his blood that it doesn't sound so striking for us.

We've domesticated it so that it's **no longer a hard saying**.

There's a wonderful scene from the 1982 Oscar-winning movie, "*Gandhi*," which helps show just how crazy the Christian teaching about holy communion might appear to an outsider – or to us – if we take it seriously. (I know I've shared it before, but it's just too appropriate to pass up.)

The movie tells the life story of Mohandas Gandhi, and his leadership of a nonviolent movement that won freedom for the people of India.

In one scene, Gandhi is riding on a train in India with some of his friends, including Charlie Andrews, an English clergyman who's come to India to offer Gandhi support. Because the train is so crowded, both Gandhi and Charlie are riding on the outside, holding on through the window.

There are many Indians riding on the roof of the railroad car, and they gesture to Charlie, the Englishman, to join them up top. He takes their offered hands, and Gandhi gives him a boost up.

Once on the roof, Charlie sits down and looks around at the rest of the passengers, their bundles and baskets clutched beside them.

Their poverty is appalling, but **they are all smiling at him**. There's a **sense of gaiety partly because of the Englishman's participation in their experience**. One Indian man shouts, "*Are you a Christian, sahib?*" Charlie nods, "*Yes, yes, I'm a Christian.*" The Indian replies proudly, "*My sister-in-law is a Christian... SHE DRINKS BLOOD.*" Charlie stares at him in surprise.

The Indian goes on, explaining the obvious: "**The blood of Christ — every Sunday!**" He is **nodding, smiling, expecting Charlie to commend him for his knowledge of Christianity**.

We are spared Charlie's attempt to explain the meaning of the sacrament when Gandhi suddenly shouts, "*Look out!*" Charlie ducks, and the next thing we see is the train entering a low tunnel.

The Indian man had heard what we Christians say about the Lord's supper. And, somehow, he **GRASPED THE REAL MEANING OF IT**, even if **we Christians often seem to forget**. He **didn't take Jesus' words "my body... my blood" metaphorically or symbolically**. He took Jesus' words **literally**.

Although you may have forgotten it, in our **Lutheran understanding of the sacrament**, **WE ALSO TAKE JESUS AT HIS WORD!**

We believe that "***in/with/and under***" the bread and wine, we **truly receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ**.

And **THIS IS, INDEED, A HARD SAYING**.

But despite this, Jesus doesn't back down. He doesn't say, "*Oh well, it's really just symbolic language, you know.*"

And, at the last supper, he doesn't say, "*This bread represents my body*" or, "*the wine in this cup is a symbol of my blood.*" No he says, "***This is my body. This is my blood.***"

Jesus makes it clear that **if we are going to follow him**, then we **have to give up our need to understand, agree, or approve of everything he says or does**.

We're going to **have to believe him, even when what he says offends us**. We're going to have to **trust him**, even when what he does **goes against human logic**.

Jesus challenges us to realize **what being a disciple truly means**. It isn't about **intellectual assent to a series of propositions**. Nor is it simply about **doing our best to follow his example** in life.

No, in discipleship, we allow Jesus to **become part of our very selves**. We put on the mind of Christ. **We take Jesus into ourselves** - he becomes **as much a part of me as my flesh and my blood**.

He's **right there in my bones** - he **fills up every cell**. He **abides** in me.

There's an **old adage**, "***You are what you eat,***" which would make me about **80% potato chips, chocolate, and ice cream**. But this saying is true in a deeper sense for us Christians.

When we receive Christ's body and blood - in/with/and/under the bread and wine of communion, we put on Christ himself.

As St. Teresa of Avila said long ago, "*Christ has no body now but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours.*" And it is **through us**, that Jesus walks the earth today, **caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, loving the unlovely.**

St. Teresa knew that **WE ARE, INDEED, WHAT WE EAT.**

We are **THE BODY OF CHRIST in the world.**

Friends, I'm here to tell you: **Holy Communion is a big deal!** I'll confess that I didn't always realize that when I was growing up. In fact, I resented communion Sundays, because I knew it meant worship would go longer than usual - sometimes even **beyond the sacred 60 minutes** that **God was allowed in my life** each week. (Maybe you have felt that way, too. Especially during football season.)

But **now I know: COMMUNION IS A VERY BIG DEAL.**

One of the people who did the most to teach me the importance of Communion – without realizing he was doing it – was John Ballantine, a member of my first congregation.

John was a former Roman Catholic; a crusty old soul. In WW II he'd faced death and killed many of the enemy. John had been a ruthless businessman, too, and hurt many people on his way up in the business world.

John was a shut-in, and once a month I brought him communion. During his Catholic days, John had somehow learned that receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ was **no small thing.**

Whenever I reached to place the wafer on his tongue, he **trembled**, and **tears rolled down his cheeks.**

You see, John knew that he was **receiving Christ himself.** He realized that he was, once again, receiving **full pardon for all his sins**, and the **promise of eternal life.** I've never forgotten the lesson John taught me.

And now, when I receive communion, if I really stop to think about it, I **tremble a little** and feel **powerful emotions welling up inside**, just like John did. If you take a moment to really think about it, maybe that will happen for you, too.

When we leave this place this morning, **you and I will be changed.**

In the bread and wine of communion, we will have **taken in the very body and blood of our savior.**

And, in a way we cannot understand, and certainly can't explain, **we will have BECOME WHAT WE EAT: the BODY OF CHRIST.**

We will be **energized to go out and BE CHRIST'S BODY: his hands, feet, arms, and mouth** in the world.

What an **AWESOME RESPONSIBILITY!**

What a PROFOUND PRIVILEGE!

And, after you receive communion, I hope you'll take time to **thank Jesus for giving himself to you**, and then ask yourself, "***What will Christ do through me in this coming week?***" Amen.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, open our eyes so that we may see you in the gifts we are about to receive this morning. Open our hearts, that we may be filled with wonder and joy and excitement, to think that the **very son of the Most High God** stoops down in love to join us this day. And then send us out, for mission in the word, refreshed and renewed by these gifts. In your holy name we pray, AMEN.