

Sunday August 26th 2018

Numbers 11: 4-6, 18-20, 31-32a

⁴ The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, “If only we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. ⁶ But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!”

¹⁸ [The LORD said to Moses] “Tell the people: ‘Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The LORD heard you when you wailed, “If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!” Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat it. ¹⁹ You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, ²⁰ but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it—because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?”’”

³¹ Now a wind went out from the LORD and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to two cubits [that is, three feet] deep all around the camp, as far as a day’s walk in any direction. ³² All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail.

John 6:51-19 (NIV)

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” ⁵² Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ 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. ⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

⁶⁰ On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” ⁶¹ Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! ⁶³ The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. ⁶⁴ Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. ⁶⁵ He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.” ⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

⁶⁷ “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Sermon: “You Have The Words Of Eternal Life”

For those of you who don't know, the Lectionary is series of scripture readings that many traditional churches follow in which about 75% of the Bible is covered by preachers over a three-year cycle. The readings contain an Old Testament passage, a New Testament text – usually from the various letters, a Psalm, and a gospel reading. In my first-year of ministry I chose to follow the lectionary readings, as it is systematic discipline and a good grounding for both me *and* you. Our Call to Worship is usually based on the psalm for the week, and, so far, I have been closely following the gospel readings. By focusing on one of the different passages a church could take 12 years to go through one lectionary cycle! Another thing that most of you know is that I used to be a physics professor. Now passing an exam as student in, say, quantum mechanics is one thing, but as a professor you need to *teach* it! And that means you are meant to have a thorough grasp of the subject before pontificating before what one hopes are eager students. Now, there is a parallel in preaching, in that a minister is meant to have a detailed knowledge of the Bible before preaching on it. But preaching is much *more* than teaching, in that I feel the weight of the responsibility of a minister who does not want to lead people astray. And that is, of course, how it should be. What diligent preachers realize is that we are learning all the time, discovering something new as we prepare sermons each week and make connections to our daily lives.

I want to be honest and upfront with you in saying that this week's gospel reading is very challenging. What *are* we to make of these words of Jesus, “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.”¹ I am told that many preachers chicken out at this point and preach instead on one of the other lectionary passages! As I prepared this sermon, I can see why! But it is also good for ministers be frank with their congregations, as well as providing another opportunity for the Holy Spirit to speak to us individuals, and as a community, today. We are called to faithfully preach the hard and demanding words of Jesus, not just those that are comforting.

You should also know that these words in John 6:51-59 have created theological problems throughout church history. The reason is simple, the words are graphic and offensive. We are told that the Jews disputed (heatedly) amongst themselves asking, “How can *this man* give us *his flesh to eat*?” Moreover, they had earlier identified Jesus as the son of Joseph (and Mary), someone they knew. How could “this man” be special? How could he be claiming to have “come from God”?² And what does he mean: “eat his flesh”? What are we to make *today* of his demand to *eat his flesh*?

¹ John 6:63.

² John 6:42.

Before responding to those challenging words, is worth remembering the context of this narrative contains explicit mention to God's provision of manna in the wilderness for the Israelites in the times of Moses.³ And as we heard in our Old Testament reading, it was not long before the Israelites got fed-up with the manna. They grumbled, "If only we had *meat* to eat, like we did in Egypt." The writer of Numbers presents a God who is pretty ticked-off: "I will give you meat, and you will eat it, and not just for one day but until you're sick of eating it!"⁴ God graciously gave the people manna from heaven, water from the rock, and quail to eat, but still they "rejected the LORD *who was present amongst them*" - as the writer of Numbers puts it.⁵ Now of course it is impossible to know if John was alluding to this episode in our passage today, but this incident was an integral part of the collective memory of the exodus. And that same attitude of *complaint* and the ultimate decision to *reject* Jesus, *who was present amongst them*, are both present here amongst the Jews in Capernaum. Moreover, there is perhaps a sense that Jesus is becoming more belligerent as he becomes frustrated with their persistent grumbling. The way John tells it, Jesus no longer uses the Greek word for "eat," which is the polite translation in our Bibles, but introduces the somewhat grotesque word "chew" - "only those who *chew* my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life."⁶ Jesus does not seem keen to make friends and influence people! It is not just a bluntness of the words that they found offensive; they thought this was scandalous because they *understood* his claims to mean that he was *greater* than Moses and was uniquely associated with God the Father. Without doubt, John's very physical language insists on the full humanity of Jesus, perhaps responding to later theological issues within his own community, but John's whole gospel also affirms the incarnation - God made flesh, the Word among us in human form. In other words, Jesus - in his flesh and blood humanity - is the actual presence of the life of God in the middle of all that is happening in human history.⁷ And that bold claim causes offence, both then and now.

Of course, we must quickly point out that the Jews understood perfectly well that Jesus, a fellow Jew, was *not* advocating cannibalism! Moreover, everyone knows that the Jews have strict dietary laws and drinking blood was (and is) absolutely forbidden.⁸ They are not allowed to eat meat without the blood being drained away. The reason being, as it says in Leviticus 17 [v11-14], blood stands for *life* itself. When you're mortally wounded your life ebbs away as you bleed, and life itself was seen as a gift from God. In light that, one can appreciate that eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus is a vivid, symbolic way of saying that we must take the *very life* of Jesus into the center of our being. St. Paul puts it this way, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."⁹

³ John 6:31-33,49,58.

⁴ Num 11:18-19; see also Exod 16:13.

⁵ Num 11:20.

⁶ "chew" or "gnaw" - see John 6:54; the same word is used in verses: 56,57,58.

⁷ See also 1 John 4:2; 2 John:7.

⁸ See Gen 9:4; Deut 15:23; Lev 17:10-14.

⁹ Gal 2:20.

At this point you'll recognize that the language Jesus uses is also very much like the words of the Last Supper,¹⁰ even though John's gospel has no description of that meal. Obviously, the chronology within the overall ministry of Jesus is all wrong here, but the fact that this rhetoric echoes that of Holy Communion has proved irresistible to Christians, although this interpretation has been hotly contested throughout church history.¹¹ People who stress this view also point out that John places the feeding of the 5000 and this discussion at Passover time.¹² And we must also remember that John the Baptist earlier introduced Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."¹³ Furthermore, Jesus uses the important phrase "abide in me" here, which is a repeated many times in John's Upper Room discourses.¹⁴ While this link with Holy Communion *may* well have been on John's mind, and his audience likely made that connection; nevertheless, some caution is needed. It is very easy for us to merely *spiritualize* this eating and drinking, and perhaps this lets us off the hook of John's challenging portrayal of Jesus as the Bread of Life. Moreover, another factor to consider is that the *context* of Holy Communion in the other Gospels is the *death* of Jesus at Passover time. In contrast, John's emphasis of the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus being *life-giving*, just as the manna was in the wilderness.¹⁵

In other words, is quite legitimate to see this text in a *non-literal* sense but we just need to be careful as to what it symbolizes. Look at it this way. You won't be surprised to know that we have a fair number of bookcases in our house that are all full of books! But I have not yet read *every* book; perhaps you are the same! Now as long as I do not read a specific book, it remains "external" to me. One day I plan to read that book. And I'm anticipating that I will be engaged, fascinated, and moved by what I read – and probably will wish I had read it earlier! Once I read the book and embrace its contents, it will have become internalized and a part of who I am. I will be able to remember it; I can feed on it as I process its contents and build on it. So it is with Jesus. For many, Jesus is like a book that remains unopened. It is only when we take and absorb Jesus into our very being that we can truly discover who he is.

John concludes this long discussion with the reaction of those who were *following* Jesus. Many of them responded by saying, "This is a *hard* teaching. Who can accept it?"¹⁶ The Greek word used means *not* "hard to understand" but "hard to accept." John's portrayal of Jesus' reply is almost as if he is muttering under his breath, "If they are offended that the Son of Man came down from heaven [v38,41], what will they think if one day they see the Son of Man ascending back to heaven [v62]!"¹⁷ Such a comment can obviously only be appreciated with hindsight, in light of the death, resurrection, and ascension of

¹⁰ See 1 Cor 11:23-26.

¹¹ Moreover, we can also get sidetracked into thinking about the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation in which the bread and the wine become the body and blood of Jesus Christ during Holy Communion.

¹² John 6:4.

¹³ John 1:29. See also Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12.

¹⁴ See John 13:31– 6:33. John is emphatic: God shares God's life with Jesus and the one who eats the Bread of Life shares in that life-giving relationship.

¹⁵ It is also fair to point out that John also references the betrayal of Judas (John 6:64,71) and the future tense in 6:51b.

¹⁶ John 6:60.

¹⁷ See also John 3:13-14; 20:17.

Jesus.¹⁸ Another reason this was hard to accept is that many of his followers wanted Jesus to become their king, and he would not.¹⁹ And what Jesus offered, they would not receive. In short, when they had heard and understood his claims, they lost interest and rejected him.

The same is often true today. If Jesus was simply a wise sage giving moral and ethical advice we could accept him as such, even if we then ignore what he had to say! That is the kind of box or category many would like to place Jesus in, because it dismisses his claim to have come from God and places him as a purely human being. That is, in part, because we have been influenced by the philosophy of materialism, by that I mean we prefer to see reality only in physical and scientific terms and therefore dismiss non-physical things. The hardline reductionist would say that, ultimately, we humans are simply a collection of complex chemicals and water. But this denies the value of human consciousness, thought, memory, love and beauty. Jesus puts it this way: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh [on its own] is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are *spirit and life*.”²⁰ In other words, don’t regard our bodies as “flesh *without* spirit,” and to truly unite them together requires us to live in a deeply interconnected way with God, our Creator. Another reason why this is hard for us to accept today is because we are talking about embracing an element of “*mystery*.” But this is not mystery for its own sake, rather it acknowledges *reason* itself has limits and the things we value most defy rationality. Nor does it endorse a human quest for “spirituality.” Those who promote spirituality and non-physical ideas as the ultimate reality still tend to place *themselves* at the center of the universe. Consequently, this becomes self-affirming and we remain the masters of meaning.²¹ Nevertheless, those who are wise recognize the fundamental importance of *faith*. It is faith that leads to understanding; we must take a step of faith in order to live life with meaning, even in order to love. Jesus, then, is claiming to genuinely unite the physical *and* the spiritual and to give authentic life; reality itself in all its fullness. But to receive that, he says we need to come to *him*. And whoever *abides in him* will live forever.

Jesus then asks the twelve, his closest followers, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter, as the spokesman for the disciples, answers: “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.”²² This is a profound moment of affirmation of faith; they understand the meaning of the miraculous *sign* of the feeding of the 5000, and they have come to believe in the truth of the message of Jesus and of his identity. This was the disciples’ conclusion. This is John’s conclusion. What is our conclusion?

¹⁸ This is John’s three-stage “glorification of Christ”: Jesus is *lifted up* on the cross, *raised* from the death, *ascends* (returns) to the Father.

¹⁹ John 6:15.

²⁰ John 6:63.

²¹ What I am claiming here is that human spirituality will never contradict or challenge our own will but will make us feel better about ourselves and will affirm will we hold to be true.

²² John 6:67-69. This is John’s first mention of “the twelve.” Since he has no call narrative for the twelve disciples, he is assuming his audience is fully aware of this fact from oral tradition and, quite likely, from the other gospel accounts. Note, the title “Holy One of God” has (added) variants in the ancient Greek manuscripts. Curiously, this specific title (as opposed to “Messiah” or “Christ”) is said by a demon in Mark’s account (Mark 1:24)!

Jesus has come down from God, who wants us to have all of him and he wants all of us. It is this God is so scandalously, intimately available to us.

To make this message more physical, more tangible, more real, it is fitting to have an opportunity to receive the Bread of Life in the act of Holy Communion. There is no barrier, or wall, that I want to place between you and Jesus. You are invited to come to *his* Table; to demonstrate your faith in action as you receive the gift of Jesus the Messiah, the Holy One of God in the Bread and Wine – his flesh and blood. And to say with Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live *in the flesh* I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”²³

Come to Jesus, who said: 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.”²⁴

²³ Gal 2:20.

²⁴ John 6:51.