

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen

If you are feeling a bit of de je vous after reading and hearing our gospel text from John – welcome to the club. It seems obvious once we think about it that this subject of Jesus being the bread of life, the bread of heaven is an important and very major theme for John. It is one that, apparently, he wishes to develop as long and as best he can.

Since all of this is important to John and important to relate to his followers, we, too, should take time to make sense of it as best we can.

I trust that you noticed a difference in our gospel text today from the last several week's gospel texts all promoting Jesus as the bread of life.

Here today we have a decidedly eucharistic, Holy Communion, turn. Here John's Jesus shifts from solely bread to all a second dimension or element to the "bread of Life" – his blood. Now, this would have been absolutely shocking for his Jewish audience. Not only does the gospel use vivid imagery of chewing and drinking, but Jesus suggests an action prohibited by the Torah – the consumption of blood.

The prohibition against blood is explained by belief that "the life of the flesh is in the blood," which is associated with sacrificial practices of atonement for the Jewish community. Practicing careful dietary laws to avoid accidentally consuming blood, Jesus' audience is understandably outraged.

A cruel twist of history serves to amplify this outrage. Beginning in the Middle Ages xenophobic Christians accused their Jewish neighbors not just of consuming blood, but of consuming the blood of Christian children. These baseless claims have overtime become known as "blood libel" and were still widespread into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, believe it or not, were used in propaganda by Nazi Germany to justify the Holocaust.

But we must also acknowledge that John' gospel is not principally interested in death or division. For John's community, who shared the Jewish worldview that blood conveyed life, drinking Jesus' blood would have been intended to convey the power of Jesus' life. The blood of the Eucharist, Holy Communion, then came to represent the atoning sacrifice of Jesus' death.

Just as the flesh (bread) and blood (wine) are consumed in the present-day church – as it was in the church of John's community, when Jesus speaks of the life that they convey, it is in the present tense: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life." The promises Jesus makes concerning the last day are connected with this present experience, yet they are distinct from it. Before this Jesus promises that on the last day he will raise up those who are "drawn by the Father," and now Jesus promises to raise up those who eat his flesh and drink his blood.

All of this is very similar to what's going on in our first lesson. Wisdom's feast is an invitation not for a banquet in the future or end time but rather, in the present: to "lay aside immaturity, and live."

Today Proverbs invites us to: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed."

And Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the one bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

All of you are aware, many congregations eat together at coffee times, potlucks, breakfasts, special occasions, and other times. Some folks who gather for church enjoy each other's company for breakfast before or following worship or at other times. So, it really is no exaggeration for us to say that the whole Christian church on earth is built on table fellowship. In fact, some scholars are convinced that eating and drinking together is the most important act of Christian community in all of the New Testament. Sharing food around a table is blessed by God who came down to us in flesh and blood to share our life.

Interestingly the word "hospitality" comes from the Latin root word meaning "guest." And in a very real sense hospitality makes us vulnerable. When we open our homes and our hearts to others, we may fear their judgment or rejection. Will others notice the dust balls in the corners, the worn spot on the rug? Will they love or hate the food we prepare?

In the ancient world, hospitality was where a system of justice and shame was played out. Jesus tells many stories that turn on what was expected of hosts and guests, and what happens when those expectations are disrupted. The disciples argued about their seat assignments, and others criticized their table manners. Jesus' table fellowship with outcasts – tax collectors and "sinners," among others outraged respectable people.

Codes of hospitality also included strong social norms about the duties owed to travelers and strangers. Abraham welcomes three strangers when he's still recovering from circumcision and cooks the meal himself.

What are our practices of hospitality both here at church and at home? Our congregation like most every other one proclaims that all are welcome – like Lady Wisdom's exuberant invitation to everyone within the sound of her voice. How do we practice that radical hospitality that we claim with that invitation? And what does it mean to practice radical hospitality here or at home?

That's an interesting question that we could spend a good amount of time discussing. But I think for me the bottom line in that discussion is that radical hospitality speaks to life itself. When we look at hospitality in both the Old Testament and the New Testament there is an overarching element of giving and offering life. We welcome the stranger and

offer food, drink and a place to sleep. Jesus calls those to participate in a banquet the likes of which they could only otherwise imagine.

Life, in one form or another, is being offered, no matter the cost to the host. Many of us over time have likely gone “all in” as we prepared to welcome guests. We pulled out all the stops. Spent more than we were planning, yet when it was all said and done it was worth our effort. We had a great time together, a great celebration. In some way we likely lifted up life with those we know and appreciate and love.

Currently, we are in that sketchy zone once more when it comes to being hospitable. Restrictions recently lifted that allowed us to be more hospitable are reverting to more restrictive behavior. Now we are not certain who we want to invite into our homes. We are not sure exactly how to act and respond just now.

As we look back this pandemic has brought an unthinkable amount of death and suffering to us and our world. Lives have been disrupted. Friendships have been tested and damaged, perhaps forever. We all know the litany. Heartache abounds more and more as we look at the highest number of cases and deaths in many months.

Such is life at this moment. But, for us who are being saved, our focus is not solely on death and disease and their aftermath, but on the life, the new life, we are offered by Christ.

I dare say that we Christians are somewhat unique as we view the present and the future. We have a handle on what is taking place daily through the pandemic and all that life brings. But we also have the hope that comes from a welcoming, hospitable Lord who has given himself on our behalf that we might have eternal life.

And it does us well to remember that eternal life does not begin the second our earthly life ends, rather eternal life begins as we are adopted as God’s children at baptism and given the gift of God himself- the Holy Spirit.

Because of our biblical heritage that includes being radically hospitable, we are also about welcoming all those who are in need of life, of the things of life – food, clothing, shelter and perhaps more importantly right now - hope. All are welcome. All are welcome to the hope we have. Jesus wants all of us and he gives all of himself. He boldly invites his disciples in every age to consume him – to follow him so closely, to love him so fully, that his life is incorporated into our own. We are indeed one body.

Come to the table, where Jesus invites us to eat his body and drink his blood. Come to the table and take what you are – the body of Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen