

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14
Psalm 111
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58

Proper 15B
Fay Bainbridge State Park, Bainbridge Island
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Food and Drink Indeed

I used have a rector whose invitation to communion went like this: *My flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed says the Lord. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them*¹. Not *The gifts of God for the people of God, holy things for holy people* at that table. It was startling really. I can hardly bear to read those words, *eat my flesh and drink my blood* let alone repeat them Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, imagining them to be a compelling invitation to communion. And yet, this is the 4th Sunday we've heard Jesus talking about eating flesh and drinking blood.

We've done a lot to try to make sense of those words already. We've talked about taking Jesus into ourselves in the Eucharist, about feeding on him rather than feeding on the stuff of the world, we've talked about the truth of hunger, both visceral and spiritual, and the folly of trying to separate messy flesh and blood bodies from tidy and ethereal spirituality. Is there any more to say? Apparently there is.

This 6th chapter of John's gospel is some of the most sacramental stuff we get in scripture. Some refer to John's gospel as the Eucharistic gospel and there are lots of theological reasons why that is. The most obvious reason is this lengthy discourse about bread and bread of life which points directly to the Eucharist and to Jesus being truly present with us and in us there. So it's very interesting that John doesn't even have the institution of the Eucharist in his gospel. When we come to the night before Jesus died in John's gospel, we get Jesus washing the disciple's feet instead of eating bread and drinking wine. He was teaching the disciples about participating in the life of Christ, not with bread and wine, but by stooping to wash their feet. It was a different sort of invitation to participation in the life of Christ, and that is an interesting thing to ponder. We know Jesus comes to us in the ordinary things of life. Bread and wine are two of those ordinary things. So are water and human touch. So is humility.

Way back in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he was walking along the water on a beach a lot like this. The seashore was his native ground and it's where he called his first disciples Simon, Andrew, James and John. Close your eyes and imagine Jesus walking along the beach by the sea of Galilee. Hear the waves coming up on the shore, listen to the sounds of seabirds and the voices in the distance. Breathe in the smell of the sea of Galilee, and hear Jesus calling to those fishermen to come and follow him, to come and fish for people. The seashore is where it all

¹ John 6:53-55

began. Jesus began his work in a place much like the place we are right here and now, a place very unlike the beautiful church building where we usually spend our Sunday mornings.

When Jesus called the fishermen by the sea of Galilee, when he told his disciples they could have no part in him unless they allowed him to wash their feet², when Jesus invited his disciples to eat the bread and drink the wine so they could take him in, he was wasn't only speaking to those followers some 2,000 years ago. He was speaking to his followers always and forever, offering each of us so many beautiful invitations to participate in the life of God. The whole Christ event began by the sea. And today, our invitation to participate in the life of God continues by the sea. Today we are the fisherpeople Jesus calls to participate in his life by bringing justice and peace and mercy and love into the world. It's spiritual work that we do with flesh and blood bodies. Just like Jesus, we're supposed to give our flesh and blood selves for the life of other flesh and blood selves in the world. You see, with all his talking about eating flesh and drinking blood, Jesus reminds us that life in this world, in the flesh, in flesh and blood, is where God chooses to meet us. The Logos, God's living Word became the flesh of the very human Jesus and showed up at the beach. And the love God poured out when the Word became Jesus in the flesh who dwelt and dwells among us, is the same love God poured out when Jesus gave his flesh and blood on the cross. The life, the love that is stronger than death, always, always comes to us in the flesh, whether that be in the flesh of the incarnate Jesus, the flesh of the ones we love most in the world, or in the flesh of the ones we don't.

We use the words "flesh and blood" to describe human beings. But those words describe the divine, too. "God became human that humans might become divine," our Church Father Athanasius said. And in these stories about the bread of life-that-Jesus-tells over and over again, he is telling us that divinity is ours for the taking. And that when we actively take God into ourselves, we are profoundly changed. Let me tell you a story of how I know this...

One of the last things I did with my mom before she died, was to visit the Berkeley Rose Garden. My mother loved roses. This particular garden feels like an ancient Greek amphitheater, with circles of terraces descending down, down, down from the roadside and all of them covered in roses. Ringing the uppermost circle were old wooden seats, smooth as silk, worn from decades of use, and trellises covered with climbing roses. After walking the paths, I sat down on one of those old wooden seats and gazed over the gardens and beyond to the San Francisco Bay. And I began to pray. "I am lonely," I prayed. "I miss my mom." And then I simply sat, eyes closed, warm breeze blowing, the fragrance of a thousand roses wafting over me. And I felt the presence of the divine. With my eyes closed, I could see Jesus sitting on the bench next to me. He sat, leaning forward a little with his elbows resting on his thighs, hands folded, thumbs upward, and his head tilted toward me, as though he was listening very, very carefully.

² John 13:8

“I am so sad.” I prayed. And then Jesus just slid over on the bench, not right up next to me, but right into me. “Abide in me as I abide in you.” he said.

That’s the abiding that grows in us each time we take in the body of Christ, the bread that came down from heaven. *My flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed, says the Lord. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them...*

We can be tempted to say that Jesus is speaking symbolically or metaphorically, we can say he’s talking about remembering him in the Eucharist. It’s more comfortable that way than trying to make sense of something that quite literally sounds like cannibalism. But Jesus is so insistent and his language is so graphic that it really doesn’t let us go all spiritual, it won’t let loose of the flesh and blood reality of Jesus or of our own lives or the lives of every flesh and blood beloved child of God. No bodies without spirit. No spirits without bodies. Flesh and spirit. Bread and body. Wine and blood. They’re all inseparable. We cannot separate the mystery of God from our own flesh and blood. We can’t separate the mystery of God from the flesh and blood of the ones we love or even the ones we don’t love. God’s Holy Spirit abides in everything in the whole wide world, in the sand, the wind, the rocks, the sea, in you and in me – we’re all alive with it. And when we come to the table today, where everything is gift and everything is shared, we ourselves will become the Body in which all God’s scattered and broken children are gathered and made whole. When we come to the table today, we ourselves will become the blood poured out for the life of the world. Amen