

Whetting Our Appetites [or not]

[Text -John 6:30-35; 49-55]

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At last Sunday's Coffee Hour, Sue Stenzel asked me if this Sunday's Readings would be difficult - basically meaning, would they contain any of those weird, hard-to-pronounce Biblical names or places. I told her, while I *could* pick an Old Testament text filled with strange words, that this Sunday's New Testament reading would provide plenty of strangeness. The sixth chapter of *John* contains some of the most bizarre words attributed to Jesus. Yet for some bizarre reason, the Biblical scholars who put together our lectionary of readings, have chosen passages from that sixth chapter of *John* for four consecutive Sundays. [Apparently, they don't do much week-to-week preaching!] I've decided to edit and combine those four readings into one, and to address these difficult words from *John* today, in one fell swoop!

Jesus says "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." Those are peculiar words - Jesus comparing to himself to some kind of heavenly manna, that can bring Eternal Life to all who partake. And it gets more peculiar: "The bread that I will give for the life of the world, is my flesh!" O.K...but then, it gets graphically gruesome: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you...for my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink!" Now if that sounds a bit unappetizing to you and me, imagine how repulsive those words sound to people of the Jewish faith. It's not kosher for them to eat the flesh of an *animal*, unless the blood has been properly removed. Yet Jesus says "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you."

As Sue and I talked about the "difficulty" of today's reading, I briefly thought about bailing on this text and just picking another. But then Sue said something that I've heard before, from quite a few people: That there's a certain, uneasy *disconnect* between what partaking of the "Body and Blood of Christ" in Communion is *supposed* to mean,

and what the actual experience genuinely feels like. It's really not surprising that many of us feel this way. As David Lose says in our Continuing Testament, there is - and always has been - intense debate within the Church about the meaning of the Sacraments. And while we, here, welcome and respect everyone's personal understanding of Holy Communion, it is important from time to time, to explore those understandings. And this morning's text does provide an excellent opportunity to do so.

A good place to start, is by [excuse the word] *dissecting* what Jesus might mean by "eating and drinking his flesh and blood". Does he truly mean the actual act of chewing and swallowing? Certainly he doesn't mean ingesting the meat on his bones and the fluid in his veins. For us today, an obvious way to lessen the literal harshness of these words, is to view them through the lense of Holy Communion. Yet in 1st Century Israel, that particular frame of reference wouldn't have fully evolved. So maybe there's a more historically helpful way to consider this. Back in Jesus' day, bread and wine basically *represented* eating and drinking - breaking bread together; sharing a cup of wine - experiencing family and hospitality, nourishment and the celebration of Life's basic blessings. So at that fateful Passover meal, when Jesus calls the bread his "body" and the wine his "blood", it makes sense that they all eat and drink, as a fitting way to celebrate, commemorate, and cherish their time together. The disciples were probably confused as to what Jesus was talking about; but the important thing was that they were connecting with their wonderful teacher, leader and friend.

Down through the centuries, however, the multiple interpretations of *how* Jesus' body and blood are presented in the form of bread and wine, have sadly stifled that uplifting sense of close community and Christ-centered celebration. The real problem, arises, when people insist that *their* interpretation is the only definitive truth! And if you don't buy-into their specific doctrine, you can be "ex-communicated" - excluded from Communion, and expelled from their faith community! So, Jesus' open and inclusive practice of welcoming all manner of people to the Table, gets pushed aside by human hubris and religious rigidity - by controlling, power-hungry purists who say, "We won't allow you to join us at the Table, because we believe that your *lack* of belief

and your theological ignorance will grievously offend God!" [Really? It makes you wonder whose ignorance is truly offensive!]

As I've said before, I find it extremely helpful to remember that Jesus says, "Take and eat!" He doesn't say, "Take and figure it out, and accurately articulate what it means!" The truth is, that even if you and I were to use the exact same words to describe what Communion means, our personal *understanding* of those words may not be the same; which is perfectly acceptable! A good meal can give us satisfaction, sustenance, and energy - even if we don't fully appreciate the fine nuances of culinary art, or correctly understand the complex science of nutritional values. In the same way, our eating and drinking of the Communion meal can fill and satisfy us - even strengthen and sustain our faith - regardless of how we understand the various theologies surrounding it. Nevertheless, I still think it can be beneficial for us to contemplate how the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ might be integrated within those elements of bread and juice.

According to the Hebrew Faith, and according to the Public Service messages of the American Red Cross - *Blood Equals Life!* As the ancient Hebrews observed, when an animal or a person is injured, and their blood begins to flow-away, their strength and their life *also* flows-away. And when too much blood is lost, life itself is also lost. A creature's life is intricately connected to its blood, which carries throughout the body all the essential "stuff" that is needed to sustain life and vitality.

So when Jesus says that he will give his flesh and blood for the Life of the World, he is saying that he will pour out all that he has, and all that he is, for the sake of all people - which is precisely what he does. Jesus proclaims that Divine compassion, grace and mercy is for *all!* And when the power-hungry purists of his day tell him, "No, you must stop this - *these* people aren't acceptable to God," Jesus doesn't stop! He is willing to speak the truth, and *live* the truth, of the inclusive nature of Divine love - even though he knows that it may ultimately bring him to a cross, where his body will be broken, his blood shed, and his life poured-out for the sake of all humanity. And on that

Passover night, as his death is imminent, Jesus gathers his friends, breaks the bread and pours the wine - physical signs of community and nourishment, Life and celebration, as well as historic symbols of Israel's Divine deliverance from Egyptian slavery. And Jesus adopts and embraces these elemental symbols as his own.

"This is my body - this is my blood - broken and poured out for you and for all people, so that you will know and remember that I love you - and that God loves you - with a love which transcends death itself! So, please, eat and drink and let the Divine Love and Life which I have experienced, become a tangible part of each one of you!"

For me, that's what it means to eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We eat bread, we taste juice, yet we are viscerally reminded through these physical elements, of Christ's unfailing promise to be with us, and *with/in* us; to unite us, strengthen us, and to work through us. By faith, we can *consume* together the Life and Love of Jesus Christ. And through faith, you and I can be *consumed* with that same Life and Love.

In Holy Communion, we share of One Bread and Cup, because in spite of any differences we have, we essentially are One Human Family. And let's face it, all humans need to eat, and most people *like* to eat - as is evidenced every week at our Coffee Hour! So even though today we won't share the Bread and Cup of Holy Communion, we can still share a little taste of food and drink. And while our Coffee Hour fare may be a bit less than our wonderful pot-luck lunches or our fantastic Thanksgiving dinners, the life and love and energy and joyful community that we experience here, is still absolutely spectacular! And best of all, ALL of this is merely a *foretaste* of that Great Heavenly Feast still to come!