

Proper 15, Year B[Proverbs 9:1-6](#)[Psalm 34:9-14](#)[Ephesians 5:15-20](#)[John 6:51-58](#)**You are What You Eat**

Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” In other words, *you are what you eat*. Once when I was a baby my parents had to take me to the doctor because my nose had turned orange. Bright orange from the way my mom told the story! The doctor explained to them that I had too much carotene in my diet and asked what I’d been eating. Evidently I loved the carrot baby food and that’s basically all they could persuade me to eat. If you are what you eat it seems I was almost literally turning into a carrot!

I can’t say I’m still quite the carrot fan these days, . . . but I do love carrot cake. Which is part of the problem. Today I am what I eat because what I eat tends to stick with me more and become this intertube I carry around. Now, it’s not as big as it used to be because I realized a few years ago that I had to make a lifestyle change. Not only did I have a lot of extra weight, but my cholesterol was over 300. I found that I was getting sick more often, and just having odd health problems in general. Having a history of heart disease and cancer on both sides of my family I decided I wasn’t doing myself any favors. Along with exercise I started to be more careful about what I ate. Though I still love a good meal, and good desserts, including carrot cake, and especially cookies.

Yet, despite my love of good food I have discovered a very simple truth: when I add better foods to my diet—more fruits and vegetables—and take in less things that aren’t good for me—sugars and processed foods—I feel better. I have more energy, I

sleep better, I'm in a better mood. What the doctor tells you at your annual checkup turns out to be true! But cookies are good. Hamburgers and hot dogs are good. And we're having all of that after church today! Which is fine, of course, as long as the rest of the day I don't eat junk exclusively. As we all know very well in this wonderful city, with our culture of good home-cooking, and our myriad good restaurants, it can be a struggle to maintain a healthy, balanced diet. If you can maintain that balance, however, we all know that it makes us feel better, adds to our vigor and lifespan. You are what you eat might be a trite little phrase, but there's a lot of truth in it.

Jesus suggests this morning that a truly healthy diet includes a heapin' helpin' of him. "Whoever eats me will live because of me." Jesus says that the staple food of our lives should be his flesh and blood, and invites us to consume him regularly. People found this teaching to be difficult. In fact, detractors of the Christian faith in the second century used to believe that this new "religion" was a dangerous, cannibalistic cult. Today baptism is the door to receiving communion in the Church. In early Church the unbaptized weren't even allowed to attend a Eucharist. Since these rites happened in secret, people heard about Christians "eating the Body and Blood of Christ" and were suspicious that this secretive new group were actually cannibals, among others things. Early apologists for the faith actually had to write treatises to show Christianity was a "respectable philosophy," to try and prove that Christians did not eat people at Eucharists.¹

¹ Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1953), 293.

If you take away the obvious allusion to the Eucharist which we all naturally hear in this reading, it does sound kind of gross, doesn't it? Can you think of another religion that uses metaphors with cannibalistic overtones? While there is some history in Judaism of consuming or eating the Law, the passage still offers some real difficulty to a Jewish hearer. If you've participated in "The Bible Challenge" this year, and slogged your way through Leviticus and Deuteronomy, you'll remember the Old Testament teaches that the life of a creature is in its blood, and forbids eating it. The blood of the creature is to be used in sacrifices on the altar, or poured out on the ground, but never eaten. The penalty for doing so is to be cut off from the community completely (Lev. 17:10-14; Deut. 12:16,24). But here's Jesus saying eat my flesh and drink my blood. It's gross. It's unbiblical. Is it any wonder that people found this teaching difficult? So difficult, in fact, that in next week's reading we'll hear that some decided they couldn't follow Jesus anymore because of it. He lost disciples over this.

There's a certain catholic piety that persists, one that says that when you eat the bread at communion you shouldn't actually chew the wafer. You should let it sit in your mouth and get soggy on your tongue until you can swallow it without chewing. You wouldn't want to hurt Jesus by chewing on him. I guess it's okay, though, just to let him be eaten up by your stomach acid! I always make sure I do some chewing when I eat the Eucharistic bread, and I love it when we use real bread for that reason. When Jesus says "eat" here in John 6 it's a pretty forceful word. Some scholars like to point out that the word Jesus uses can also be translated to mean "munch," "crunch."² Jesus wants us to

² Francis J. Moloney, *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 4, *The Gospel of John*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 224.

chew on him, gnaw on his flesh. Bite down, go after it like meal from Mandina's! This is an invitation to a hearty and healthy meal for the famished meant to be eaten, enjoyed, allowed to truly fill us up and nourish us.

Set the Eucharist aside for a moment, though, because it serves to sanitize the difficulty of the passage, and I don't think this is meant to be a safe invitation. I think it's one that calls us to get down in the dirtiness and grittiness of life, to really engage. Remember when we talked about the meaning of "flesh" last week? That it's not just skin, but about the reality of being a human creature? I think Jesus means us to hear these words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood in all of their earthiness. "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink," Jesus says. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me." Jesus talks elsewhere about following him, but this is an even deeper invitation. Here, as one scholar notes, we are "encouraged not simply to follow Jesus, which is difficult enough, nor simply to be with Jesus, but we are to 'consume' (v. 57, my translation) him." This is about "ingestion, consumption, intimate, deep engagement,"³ where we truly become what we eat. This is about such deep intimate relationship that we become completely united with what we consume. We consume Jesus, and in a sense, he comes to consume us as well: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

³ William H. Willimon, *Feasting on the Word*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3, *Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16) (Kindle Edition)*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Loc. 12755, 12758.

I've been reflecting on what it can mean to be consumed by Jesus, and I think of a couple of people. One is Jonathan Myrick Daniels. Jonathan is one of our modern-day saints, and has his own feast day which was this past Friday. Pilgrims from around the country, including our own Bishop Gray, made their way to the Diocese of Alabama this weekend to celebrate Jonathan's life as part of a Civil Rights pilgrimage. Jonathan was a young man who in his early twenties was an Episcopal seminarian in the north, and became involved in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. While in Hayneville, AL, in 1965, after spending 6 days in jail "for joining a picket line, Jonathan and his companions were unexpectedly released. Aware that they were in danger, four of them walked to a small store. As sixteen-year-old Ruby Sales reached the top step of the entrance, a man with a gun appeared, cursing her. Jonathan pulled her to one side to shield her from the unexpected threats. As a result, he was killed by a blast from the 12-gauge [shotgun]."⁴ Why would he do such a thing?

The priest John Julian, who knew Jonathan, explains that while Jonathan had marched at Selma with Dr. King, and had made several trips to Alabama to help in the movement, he finally decided that it wasn't enough. He thought the witness Christianity demanded was deeper than that, and he decided "to return to Selma—not to participate in any great public demonstrations, but merely to live with the poor suffering Blacks in Lowndes County, Alabama and to share their lives." Jonathan wrote, "I really wanted to do the incarnational thing. It seemed to me that Jesus did not simply come for a day or two to comfort a few evils and leave, he came to the earth to stay—for a lifetime."⁵ It was

⁴ *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* (New York: Church Publishing, 2009), 526.

⁵ John Julian, *Stars in a Dark World (Kindle Edition)* (Waukesha, WI: The Order of Julian of Norwich, 2009), Loc. 10455-10457.

because Jonathan had consumed Jesus, that he was also consumed by him. Being consumed by him, he desired to live like him. Not only did he live like him, he died like him, too.

The other person who comes to mind (and whose story is less dramatic but by no means less valid) is a friend of mine who has recently come back to church after many years of absence. Something has grabbed hold of him, and he just can't get enough. He loves being in his church, he loves learning more about the Bible and about Jesus. He is voraciously reading anything and everything he can get his hands on. He says that this new found hunger for Christ has completely changed the way he's doing business at work, and how he's approaching life with his family. He says he feels better about himself, about his life; that his relationships are better. He is doing more than just consuming Jesus, it is evident he is consumed *by* Jesus. He is becoming what he eats. He is feeling the nourishment and it is leading him to want more. It's leading him into a richer, healthier, more abundant life where the things that really matter are becoming clearer to his eyes, like carotene does for a rabbit. His nose hasn't turned orange, though. He is eating the body and blood of Jesus, in the Eucharist, and in the side dishes of prayer, study, and action, and he feels greater hope and purpose, and is nourished.

Will Willimon writes, "There is no knowing who the Christ is without visceral, total engagement. We will not be able to comprehend him by sitting back comfortable in the pew, and coolly considering him as if he were an abstract, disembodied idea. Incarnation means that we must get up, come forward, hold out empty hands, sip wine, chew bread." The Eucharist is the first and best place to come to eat Jesus' flesh and to drink his blood, and surely John the Evangelist meant for us to think of this when he told

us of Jesus' jarring words. Yet, there's more than this. Jesus calls us to a relationship with him that is all consuming. That eating and drinking is in the life that Jesus gives to the whole world, not just to the Church. Think of the relationships in your life that consume the greatest amount of your time and attention. What does it take to maintain those relationships, and to be fed by them regularly? Do those relationships—whether with people or things—make you feel healthy or unhealthy? How much do they ultimately nourish or drain you? For what are you truly hungry, and what consumes the most of your time and energy? Is that really what you want? What is it that you can think of in your life that truly feeds you? There are lots of things to consume in this life, and lots of things that can consume us, and we are what we eat. Jesus calls us to consume him, and to be consumed by him. To let our lives and his life become intertwined in the eating and drinking, and in doing so to find nourishment and life abundant.

WORKS CITED

- Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*. New York: Church Publishing, 2009.
- Julian, John. *Stars in a Dark World (Kindle Edition)*. Waukesha, WI: The Order of Julian of Norwich, 2009.
- Moloney, Francis J. *Sacra Pagina*. Edited by Daniel J. Harrington. Vol. 4, *The Gospel of John*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998.
- Richardson, Cyril C., ed. *Early Christian Fathers*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1953.
- Willimon, William H.. *Feasting on the Word*. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Vol. 3, *Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16) (Kindle Edition)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.