

August 22nd, 2021

Year B; 13th Pentecost

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18

Psalm 34: 15-22

John 6: 56-59

John 6:56-69

Jesus said, "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. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "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."

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Today is our 5th and final Sunday featuring gospel readings from John that are focused on Jesus as the bread of life. Today's reading includes some of the most jarring language, with Jesus speaking of:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood..."

Before we explore that language a little, I'd first like to step back with some quick reminders about the gospel of John. John was the last of the four gospels to be written, and thus the farthest away from the events of Jesus's earthly life, and the farthest from eyewitnesses to his life.

Each gospel takes a different point of view in writing about Jesus, each emphasizes different aspects of Jesus. The writer of John focused more on the godly side of Jesus. Thus, in John Jesus seems to always know what is in the future, he is all seeing, god-like. We see this in this reading when Jesus says:

“The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.”

For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.”

Jesus does not appear as human as in the other gospels, less often shown hungry, tired, bewildered, in pain. But please do not hear that Jesus is without humanity in John, after all this is the gospel where Jesus weeps at the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus. It is just that the writer of John chose to emphasize more the godliness of Jesus.

Now we can return to our passage, and that jarring language.

Our reading opened:

“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. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

Yikes. I've read and studied and spoken these words for 35 years and John's language is still unsettling, a little too realistic.

And yet, as Christians, what do we believe about the Eucharist? Is it flesh and blood?

As Christians we have, not surprisingly, a wide variety of opinions on that question.

The Catholic Church teaches that the wafer, the bread, with the prayer of consecration, becomes the body of Jesus. Catholics are taught that each time they receive the bread they are literally consuming the flesh of Jesus. In addition, the wine, with the prayer of consecration, becomes the blood of Jesus.

In contrast, in many protestant denominations, like Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist, the church sees the bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood of Jesus, but that they do not change into the actual body and blood in the communion service.

And what about our hybrid faith in the Episcopal Church? I call us hybrid as we retain a bit of our Catholic roots, and yet were formed in the Reformation and often see things as our protestant neighbors do. What about us in the Episcopal Church?

Well, the Episcopal Church chooses a wonderful open path about the bread and the wine, explaining that in the end, the answer is.....that it is a mystery!

As is the way of the Episcopal Church, there is much room for contemplation left around the Eucharist.

The bread and the wine may become the literal body and blood of Jesus, or not. The ritual is understood and experienced by each of us, and understood each time we receive.

In my own experience, there have been times I have received communion and felt a deep connection to the literal body and blood of Jesus, and other

times I have felt a more distant, more symbolic connection.

The Eucharist is a profound mystery, and I love a church that leaves a lot of room for mystery!

But now looking one more time at what Jesus says in this text, the jarring language might have made us miss what he said afterwards.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

Ohh! Jesus says that when we receive the Eucharist, this mystery, we abide in Jesus and Jesus in us.

Abide.....the oldest definition of abide is that one lives in, that one is at home.

Jesus is saying to us, receive, and be at home in me. I don't need anyone to spell out a mystery and to answer all of my questions to know, that Jesus offers us a lifegiving gift, the chance to abide in him, to be at home with him.

So, why do so many of his followers, in our reading today, turn back at these words, why do so many walk away saying that what Jesus teaches, what he says is too difficult, this invitation to abide in him??

Well, we might think those silly people, they missed the boat! Not like us of course, for goodness sakes, we are here in church, so we must have accepted that invitation to abide in Jesus, for Jesus to be our home.

Hmmm.....well, here we are back at that issue we talked about last week, our overwhelming urge to be in charge of our lives. We love to think, to believe that we are in control. Our self-esteem comes from success, from achieving, and all of that increases the illusion that we love, the illusion that we are in control, in charge of our lives.

Why did so many turn back at Jesus's words?

Why do we turn back too?

It is a lot easier to attend church than it is to abide in Jesus, to be at home in

Jesus.

To abide in Jesus, to make him our home, calls us to live in his ways of radical love, to let go our illusory control and follow.

To abide in Jesus is to be at home in God's love, to be immersed not in our grasping for control, but in God's love.

To abide in Jesus is to let go of all the energy and time we give to keeping up the illusion of being in control, and give our precious time and energy to God, to sharing the inexplicable mystery of God's love for all of us, no matter our income, our health, our nationality, our color, our sexual identity, our age.

Can we hear Jesus' question for the 12, can we hear Jesus asking us: "*Do you also wish to go away?*"

Can we reply like Peter: "*Lord, to whom can we go?*"

We know we are so like Peter, that we will still make many mistakes.

And yet can we too reply: "*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.*"

Can we reply that we choose to abide in the mystery, and to come home to our God?

Amen.

