

For the past several Sundays, our lectionary has focused on Jesus speaking about himself as the “bread of life.” The I-o-n-g sixth chapter of John’s gospel has brought us a long way in our understanding of Jesus – but we’re also discovering these teachings were more than some of the folks in Capernaum cared to handle.

Only a chapter ago, they were hailing Jesus, who had fed them so generously with those five loaves and two fish. Now, they were starting to grumble: “This is more than we can stomach!” Indeed, many of his followers are dropping out, disassociating from Jesus – and, understandably, this is disheartening to Jesus and his closest disciples.

As for those closest disciples, Jesus is *himself* beginning to wonder. Will they, too, want to leave him? So he asks them – point blank. And Peter answers: “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have faith in you – and we know that you *are* the Holy One of God.”

Interesting, isn’t it? All heard the same teaching. All knew the same Jesus. But there were opposite reactions. Some rejected Jesus – and then deserted him. Others welcomed his words, confessed their faith, and drew closer to him. Same man, same message – opposite reactions. Where does the difference lie?

I think the difference lies here: those who have *left* see Jesus as a threat –

- a threat to their way of life,
- a threat to their accepted notions,
- a threat to their perception of reality.

Those who have stuck by him, on the other hand, see in Jesus’ words not a *threat* but a *challenge*. Yes, he surely *challenges* their way of life, their accepted notions, their grip on reality – but uncomfortable though this challenge makes them, they understand *why* he’s speaking in the way he does – and they remain intrigued by where he seems to be taking them spiritually.

Still, I find myself wondering about the followers who dropped out and went home. What had Jesus said that upset them? Is it all this talk of eating his flesh and drinking his blood? I know if I weren’t familiar with the Eucharistic language we today take for granted, *I’d* find that pretty odd. I’m sure it must have dumbfounded them.

And yet, I don't think, at heart, that's what the problem is. I think the problem is, well, something we *still* have a problem with. They wanted to **tame** the words of Jesus. They wanted to smooth off the blunt, bold edges of his message – make it all less shocking, less scandalous. And history shows us, every time the Church seeks to do that, the result is the same. A watered down message (which *seems* so embracing on the surface, so welcoming, so inoffensive) ultimately drives away more people than it attracts. People *like* to be challenged.

I think it's one of the reasons a “megachurch” like Bethany in Greenland does so well while mainline churches like ours languish. They set the bar high for their people. It's *hard* to live the life they prescribe for their congregants. But, in the end, that's exactly the message that works. Jesus *challenges* folks – and, yes, some drop away, but many more *respond*.

So let's take a few moments this morning to be *challenged* by this teaching. And I'm going to start (as I often do) by going back to the original Greek in the passage, which often challenges us a lot more than the commonly accepted English translation. And, sure enough, it does that here. When Jesus speaks here about eating his flesh, the word he refers to is a lot stronger than the rather fainthearted “eat.” The original word has more of a sense of “munch” – or even “gnaw.” This is the kind of eating a famished man does with a turkey drumstick. And Jesus says this is what we are to do with his body.

Is this a challenging image for you? I know it is for me. But strange – and even repulsive – as that image is, Jesus is telling us here that it really is the key to eternal life.

- You want to live forever?
- You want to enjoy life that is life indeed?

You won't find it by eating junk food. And you won't find it by fine dining. To live eternal life, starting now, you must *munch* on Jesus, *gnaw* on Jesus – be so *hungry* for Jesus that you are anxiously taking Jesus in like a famished man.

To accept what Jesus says here, to act on it, to live by it, is to embrace an aspect of life that we tend to shy away from in most of our “church life.” We want to be comfortable, secure, perhaps even predictably boring. But here, the call is to something that speaks of desperation, passion, a deep, gnawing hunger. To be honest, the level of passion Jesus is calling for here is the kind of passion that scares people stiff. And, for those who aren't at that level of passion in their lives, can actually be off-putting.

I'm going to take this even a step further. What Jesus is calling for here is not just that we put aside comfort, security, predictability. He actually asks us to *die* to what and who we were before him, to die to the life we calmly and blithely move through as if with blinders on day to day. Invitations to die are not readily accepted! And yet, *die* is exactly what Christ invites us to do here.

Now, of course, Jesus never asks of his disciples – never asks of *us* – anything he is not willing to do himself. And, sure enough, the life of Jesus represents *exactly* this sense of dying. First, in that he died to the privileges (if you'll call it that) of being the Almighty by choosing to become one of us. And, ultimately, in that he chose not just a quiet, painless death, but the most excruciating form of death imaginable as the means to take on himself every weight of our human sin.

Jesus *commits* himself to us – and he commits himself forever. This unbreakable commitment has its echo in our response to what Jesus has done: namely, our commitment to him. He challenges us to look at all the options – including the easy and comfortable ones – and *choose* the one that challenges us the most. To be so *empty* and *hungry* we actually gnaw after, munch on, the life he has to offer.

In a few moments, we will break the bread and share the wine of Eucharist. I know how easy it is to simply “go through the motions” of that great ritual feast. Like so much else, we've tamed it, made it innocuous. Almost *too* easy. But today, even if *only* today, I wonder if we might take the eyes of our imagination a step deeper as we munch on, gnaw on, be *challenged* by the Body of Christ.

Those of you listened closely to last week's gospel might remember the ways in which it sought to deepen our understanding of the banquet table at which we feast in God's Kingdom. How that table embraces the poor, the mentally ill, and a host of other people society typically shuns. Today, I don't want us not just to see Christ there – I want us to hungrily *seek* him there. See in them the full richness of Christ, even as, in our human sin, we have not yet embraced the reality and even the joy that all of them join with us at the banquet table.

And then, finally, see the flesh of Christ when you gaze in a mirror at your own self. Look at yourself, and say that this *too* is the flesh in which God lives – that on *our* lips remain the words of eternal life. And then, having thought and prayed these things, munch, gnaw, on the Body of Christ. And receive him anxiously, longingly, into yourself.