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Bread and Wine

It's good to be back! I know Brenda assured you all that I hadn't disappeared, and to be sure, of the three Sundays I was away, one was with our youth, and the latter two were for weddings in Colorado and then Pasadena. While I missed you all, it was also nice to catch up with family and friends while making new sets of each, whether with our youth and Bethlehem Lutheran, or at the weddings. To top it all off, we also moved this weekend, but with the help of our very energetic youth, some of our family, friends, and others, we can finally begin to settle after a month of near constant movement. Whoever said August is a slow month clearly has not lived a day in our shoes.

Imagine with me then, when I looked at the passage for today's gospel, and how this is week four out of five that we spend in John's gospel on the topic of bread. "I am the bread of life." "I am the living bread." "I am the bread of heaven." These phrases are baked into us through the Eucharist prayers as well as leavened by these readings, even if retreaded through these readings in month's long loaves that we eat with our ears these Sundays. Some parts of these gospel readings are soft, easy to chew, and others seem tough, and require more vigor.

What I sniffed out as the more tenacious bites are Jesus' lines about eating his bread and drinking his blood, as well as his line about his bread, or himself, being the bread of heaven, unlike the bread of his ancestors, which they ate and died. I want to examine those slices in more detail, to chew on them a bit more and to get a deeper sense of the flavor Jesus is trying to convey. All this talk of bread kinda makes me hungry.

Hunger, as Brenda spoke about last week, comes in many forms, and as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement in Encinitas, we try to reflect the various hungers that we see and feel out in the world. Some are literal, obviously, but more and more we are sensing a hunger for deeper spiritual connections, between people, the ocean, the mountains, with wisdom, and for many here in this sanctuary, to Scripture and the Sacraments. All of these potential connections require a lot of time and energy. While all of these points seem somewhat obvious, to the point of being facile, I don't want to lose the deep complexity that is the movement of the Spirit between us as a community and these hungers.

When Jesus is teaching about bread, you've got to imagine that he is at a synagogue in the lakeside city of Capernaum, with a large crowd of his lovers and haters surrounding him, biting into each line he feeds them. Perhaps, on the cool wind coming off the lake, the smell of the local bakers shop is wafting in amongst these people. Jesus, according to the gospel of John, is saying all these things about bread during the same week as the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, more like ten thousand plus when you include women and children. Not coincidentally, it's also the week of the Passover.

The reason that's so important, and no doubt many of you know this, is that Passover is the principle Jewish feast, where God's chosen people remember how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and were led by Moses through the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai, from there the desert, and the beginning of their ancestors journey to the Promised Land. Jesus, being a Jewish rabbi, is intentionally kneading the dough, if you will, causing a stir of discussion, and a spiritual hunger, among the crowd gathered around him. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Jesus isn't creating these ideas out of thin air. These phrases are rooted in the Jewish people's journey with Moses from Sinai through the desert. You see, while they were in the desert, the people began to grumble with hunger, as they were in the desert, and asked for a miracle. God delivered manna from heaven, and the people ate it and were filled. Now, in this moment, Jesus is drawing on that same imagery amongst this hungry crowd, all of whom are aware of the feeding of the ten thousand plus, and can easily draw their own line from the greatest of all prophets in their tradition, Moses, to Jesus the rabbi. So you can see why some are totally enthralled, and others completely upset at this upstart rabbi who's been drifting across Galilee for several days, causing a commotion everywhere he's been.

But he's also saying some things that sound strikingly gentile, as the idea of eating the divine, known to the Greeks and Romans as "theophagy," was a ritual among cultists who revered Demeter and Dionysus. It was done in order to receive the powers of the respective gods. For several reasons then, it's no surprise that several Jewish folks in the crowd say, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" He's saying things no rabbi ought to.

And this is where Jesus goes from upstart rabbi who causes a public fuss to a shock jockey who is clearly goading any opponents. "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

Jesus has not only placed himself close to Moses while simultaneously sounding pagan, now he's committed an extremely offensive taboo. Blood, in Hebrew culture of the time, was sacred, because it was believed to be life, to literally be life itself. It was beyond a liquid running through your veins, it possessed your very essence. Thus it was forbidden to drink it, because it was sacrilege to steal the life or essence of another by ingesting it. Plus, it's just gross! So on top of placing himself up with Moses and sounding like a gentile goon, neither of which would have endeared him to staunch traditionalists or casual religious observers, but now he's gone right off the deep end, by claiming his flesh and blood are to be eaten in order to be raised up on the last day, and to possess eternal life.

Another thing we have to remember about the Gospel of John is that, unlike the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John has the last supper, but Jesus does not say the word of institution that we hear every Sunday: He took the bread, blessed it, and he took the cup and blessed it, etc. What we've been hearing in John the last few weeks, this week, and next, are all a continuation of Jesus explaining who he is in relation to the story of salvation, and it's no mistake that he's saying this during the week of Passover, which features the last meal eaten by the Hebrews in Egypt before they left.

And this makes Jesus' statement about his blood that much more impactful, because the tenth and last plague that God sent upon the Egyptians was the Passover of death itself, which took the lives of the first born children of any house in Egypt that didn't have the blood of a lamb painted over it, God told the Hebrews what to do to save themselves from this final visitation of horror on the empire that held them captive. Jesus, in John, is again mixing Hebrew and Gentile metaphor, because it is by lamb's blood that his people were saved from death, and it is by consuming Jesus' blood that they are marked as God's people again.

Bread, blood, food, hungry crowds, anger, fear, connectedness, empires, slavery, freedom, escape, journeys, all of this is floating in the minds of the people listening to Jesus, with the Sea of Galilee behind them, as Jesus the rabbi preaches on the steps of the synagogue. It makes me hungry to hear Jesus as they did, in all the confusing, vexing, and yet completely clear way that he is communicating to Jews and gentiles alike. This is a man whose bread breaks barriers, and causes pangs of hunger for connection to him as a human and the divinity swells within his body and blood.

And that's where I want to leave you today, hungry for a God who became human, hungry for a connection that feeds your body and soul, hungry for a rabbi who is utterly astounding, and who is as simple as a loaf, and divine as the fruit of the vine.

Amen.