

## INWARDLY DIGESTING JESUS

8/22/21 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 16 (B): Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; ~~Ephesians 6:10-20~~; John 6:56-69

Anybody else wondering why we have to spend so many Sundays studying this one chapter of John? The book has 21 chapters in it, but we've spent five whole weeks exploring—in depth—just the sixth chapter!

Earlier this summer, we started with the feeding of the thousands, moved on to Jesus's teaching about being the bread of life, then being the living bread, and, then, a few weeks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Some scholars refer to these passages as the "Eucharistic Discourses" because they argue Jesus is talking about the physical bread and wine of communion.

Other theologians counter that doing so disregards all the other metaphors John's gospel offers. Besides "I am the bread of life," John's Jesus claims: "I am the light of the world," and "I am the gate for the sheep." No one argues that Jesus may have meant he is a literal light, blinding us with brightness. Instead, we understand that our journey with Christ is a metaphorical light illuminating the desired path.

When we read these words about eating and drinking elsewhere, we understand them to be metaphors. For instance, in the verses just before the section of the Psalm we read today, verse five reads: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." We seem to be much better at accepting songs and poetry as metaphorical; we understand this isn't about tasting God with our actual taste buds.

Another point some theologians make is that, if the eucharist was so important to the Gospel of John, then why isn't the wine and bread mentioned when John specifically describes the Last Supper? As Mother Hannah mentioned in her sermon last week, one explanation could be that a sacrificial meal to solidify an agreement would have been common practice back then, so the metaphorical consuming of Jesus becomes our saying "yes" to God.

We see that reflected in this morning's reading from Joshua as well. The prophet explains why they're choosing to follow God, then invites others to consider whether they're ready to commit to the same path. Joshua makes clear that a decision must be made, saying: "Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve." In essence, they are asked to choose which metaphorical gate they'll go through.

While I was studying these texts, I was also reading a book called: *Inwardly Digest: The Prayer Book as Guide to a Spiritual Life*. The author, Derek Olsen, who's a Biblical scholar and an Episcopal priest, explores all the ways this book—the *Book of Common Prayer*—holds all we need for a deep and meaningful spiritual life. He takes the time to explain why we use repetitive prayers, how they're based in Scripture, and what we can do to keep ourselves engaged.

At the same time, Olsen answers the important question: "To what end?" He explains that in order to know we've accomplished something, we have to start with a goal. Olsen asks:

“What is the purpose of our spiritual discipline?” Some people might answer, “so we can get into heaven.” But our Episcopal tradition is much more incarnational.

We understand eternal life isn’t just about the hereafter, but about abundant life in Christ right now, in a way that’s beyond time. Similarly, many scholars suggest the reason Jesus talks so much about consuming him is to jar people into realizing Jesus didn’t simply bring a message from God; Jesus is God incarnated in flesh in this world.

So, the author of *Inwardly Digest* (by the way, that title comes from a prayer found in our prayerbook: “Grant us so to hear Scripture, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them;” it’s a metaphor we know doesn’t mean that we physically eat pages of a Bible), so the author suggests we do these things—worship together, pray, read scripture—so that we each become more loving people.

He says our lives ought to be moving toward a Christ-shaped way of living that offers love, mercy and justice to those around us. And, gosh...with all that’s going on in the world—from the crisis in Afghanistan to the disaster in Haiti, don’t we need more people who are more loving?! But, Olsen cautions us not to confuse our personal, spiritual discipline as being a private and individual journey. Christianity—as alluded to in the phrase “God abides in us, and we in God,” suggests a reciprocal relationship—Christianity is a communal process.

We don’t just come here and sit beside others who are worshipping. We worship in community, and our faith is deepened as we journey together. My faith depends on you saying “Yes” to God just as much as my own yes.

So, in this morning’s Gospel, Jesus leans in and asks—just as the prophet Joshua did—“Who’s in?” Jesus knows there are those who aren’t ready to inwardly digest all his teachings, so he challenges the disciples: “Do you also wish to go away?”

Jesus has just explained—even though he had been using the metaphor of eating his flesh—that “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless,” he says. Then adds: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” And Peter speaks for all of us: “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.”

At the same time, we’ve heard enough accounts of Peter’s journey to realize he doesn’t yet fully understand what all of that means. But he’s doing his best to inwardly digest the outward teachings.

We’re here together, then, because repetition helps aid our spiritual digestion. Hearing Jesus’s message again and again, as we struggle to become a beloved community, as we try to personally make sense of who Jesus is in our lives, we say yes to God in both remembered and new ways.

But many of you will be glad to know that, next Sunday, we move on to the Gospel of Mark...finally! Until then, may you be fed by the spiritual food you throughout in our liturgy.

-AMEN

**Collect of the Day:**

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18**

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel:

"Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

**Psalm 34:15-22**

15

The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, \*  
and his ears are open to their cry.

16

The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, \*  
to root out the remembrance of them from the earth.

17

The righteous cry, and the LORD hears them \*  
and delivers them from all their troubles.

18

The LORD is near to the brokenhearted \*  
and will save those whose spirits are crushed.

19

Many are the troubles of the righteous, \*  
but the LORD will deliver him out of them all.

20

He will keep safe all his bones; \*  
not one of them shall be broken.

21

Evil shall slay the wicked, \*  
and those who hate the righteous will be punished.

22

The LORD ransoms the life of his servants, \*  
and none will be punished who trust in him.

### **Ephesians 6:10-20**

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

### **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."