



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

---

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE SCRIPTURE TEXTS FOR AUGUST 26, 2018,  
THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR B, ARE:  
JOSHUA 24:1-2, 14-18; PSALM 34: 15-22; EPHESIANS 6:10-20; JOHN 6:56-59

## FLESH-EATING FOLLOWERS



**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.”]*

This week marks the beginning of my seventh year here at Saint Mark’s, and having recently made a trip back to Arkansas to visit my ailing father, I can say that Seattle is thoroughly our home now, and we are grateful to be here.

I will admit to still living along a learning curve for cultural peculiarities of the Pacific Northwest, like the fact that the term “BBQ” here is used to describe any meal prepared or served outside. In the south, BBQ means one thing—smoked meat, and there are hotly debated claims to the best bbq in every nook and cranny. Pork BBQ ranges from Arkansas to the Carolinas, but there is dry rub and wet rub, pulled pork, ribs, sausage, and so forth; there’s mustard based sauces, honey-based, sweet, and savory, mild and hot.

And then in Texas, beef BBQ is king, not pork, and so while in Austin last month for General Convention, Kathy and I joined my sister and her husband at their favorite BBQ place in town. The line to order your food extends out the door, and often down the street, queueing in 100+ degree heat, while the smoky aroma from the BBQ pit wafts by.

I was the last in our group to order, so when I got to the counter, I ordered some brisket. And then he proceeded to cut one rib from the slab on his counter—a piece of meat so big they pulled a special platter out for it. He weighed it, along with what looked like a

dinosaur bone in the middle of the meat--\$32 worth, and then rang up the total.

It was delicious, and we all ate our fill, with Kristi and Greg taking home considerable leftovers still.

I will admit well before our eleven days in Austin were up, I found myself longing for a little Northwestern BBQ—grilled salmon and the fixings.

And then I returned to church after sabbatical, and stepped into this five week jaunt through the sixth chapter of John’s gospel, and its talk of eating flesh. With this meaty experience fresh on the mind, I got to thinking we don’t call our foods by fleshy names. A beef rib is not “flesh from a cow’s chest wall.” Your pork medallions with grilled beets and heirloom carrots don’t go by the name “flesh from a hog’s back.” Your Caesar salad with grilled chicken is not “tender greens with anchovy aioli and seared hen flesh.” Your delicious hamburger is not “ground flesh of bovine trimmings.”

I suspect this is rather offensive imagery to many of you.

Which makes what Jesus says all the more outrageous. We may hear it in the echo chamber of familiarity around this table where we speak of Christ’s body and blood week by week, and so I suspect for some of

us, we don't think much about it. But it should give us pause. Jesus has a point to make.

For five weeks we've been meandering with Jesus through this "bread of life" saga which began brilliantly enough with the feeding of the five thousand, and then had Jesus walking on water and using divine epithets for self-description. The people run after him, wanting more of that tasty bread, and he engages in discourses with the crowd first, then religious leaders, as he speaks in scandalizing ways: I am the bread of life...He who believes in me shall never die...Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will live forever...

It's all a bit much, and many who'd chased after him after tasting the miraculous bread on the hillside, now murmur to one another, this is too difficult. He's asking too much here. And they turn away and return home.

This is a crisis point in Jesus' ministry, and while I sense he is disappointed by those who abandoned the movement, he is unwavering in his commitment to press on. Who will remain with him?

In a moment of heartfelt sincerity with his closest disciples, with whom he has invested the most time and energy, he asks them the quintessential question that echoes on our ears even today: Do you also wish to go away?

Peter, sweet earnest Peter replies for all who would follow Jesus, inviting us into the community with him and the countless throngs through the ages: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life...*

Reinhold Neibuhr suggests that Peter's statement, said on behalf of us all, could be translated as: *To whom shall we go? You have the words that give meaning to life...<sup>ii</sup>*

When we speak of something scandalizing us, it's helpful to remember that the Greek word *scandalizzo* means literally, to rip apart, to break open. It is difficult, it is provocative, but for a purpose, and in this case, Jesus is inviting us into the deeper meaning of his ministry, and of what it means to follow him. He is inviting us into a deeper sense of the meaning of life. Seen by the light of his life and teachings, everything changes for those who will follow him.

Jesus does not mince words when making his call to discipleship; it includes some difficult demands. Jesus wants his followers to be "all in," because he knows that is how "this" really works. That's what this gospel passage is really about. It doesn't let us off the hook. It is designed to scandalize us—to break us open to the possibility that Jesus the Christ is truly offering us the gift of life here and now.

Much has been written about this postmodern world which holds too tight a grip on fierce individualism which can lead to stark loneliness. We find ourselves in a society

which is teetering with moral nihilism. There has been a loss of meta-narratives that lend deep meaning to life, and people are hungry for something more, something that connects them to a larger narrative. Perhaps that is why you are here, because into this parched world, Jesus comes once more and says eat my flesh and drink my blood, and I will dwell in you, and you in me.

It doesn't remove all the questions of life, nor will it spare you from the chaos of our time, but it can frame the whole of life in ways we can make sense of a path forward. And when Jesus says that those who believe in him will have eternal life, an alternative interpretation is "those who rely on him will have abundant life." Reliance orients to the relationship as intimate, real, fleshy, while belief may allow for a less corporeal connection.

So we come to the table to share a meal in which we speak of scandalous things SO THAT we might dwell in him and he in us. But here's the challenge that comes with that: What if we experience communion with Christ not just when we eat the bread, but when we go where Jesus went, we do the things he did, we hold tenderly the ones he held, we love the way he loved the world?

Spirit and flesh are not incompatible—indeed, they go hand in hand, and when you hold that piece of bread in your hand in a few moments, consider these scandalous words that Jesus speaks to you here, do this in remembrance of me.<sup>iii</sup>

What is the "this" that he is calling you to do with your life?

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://souljournaler.blogspot.com/2011/08/hard-sayings-xix-eat-my-flesh-and-drink.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/1927-03/whom-shall-we-go>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.openhorizons.org/what-is-the-flesh-in-holy-communion-teri-daily.html>