



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REVEREND EARL GROUT, DEACON
THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 15, AUGUST 15, 2021
1 KINGS 2:10-12; 3:3-14; PSALM 111; EPHESIANS 5:15-20; JOHN 6:51-58

"EAT, DRINK, LIVE"

John 6:51-58 [*Jesus said, "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." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "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. 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."*]

"Eat me, drink me." Many people today find this over the top and hard to understand. So, they skip over it or turn away. Many of Jesus's followers turn away because they do not understand him. Jesus says this five times in eight verses, so it is hard to ignore. So what is he talking about?

We should read today's Gospel in light of the entire chapter. In John 6, as I read it, Jesus reveals his true identity not only to just his inner circle, but to the people of

Israel at large. Two key points: first, it was Passover. The 5,000 Jesus fed on the hillside above the Sea of Galilee were pilgrims heading to Jerusalem for the festival, some from his hometown. Second, they knew about bread.

We do, too. Bread universally means food—the staff of life, "give us this day our daily bread." Bread means life itself to most of us, but especially to these hungry pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem. On the hillside above the sea, Jesus nourished

their bodies. In the Temple on Passover, the priests would nourish their souls.

Jews were expected to go to the Temple in Jerusalem three times a year, there to “appear before the Lord God” (Exodus 23.17). Passover was one of them. There they would be shown the Bread of the Presence—the “Showbread”, kept in the inner sanctuary. The Bread of the Presence was considered a visible, material sign of God’s presence or face. In fact, the Hebrew word for bread—*panim*—is also the word for face. The priests would hold up the bread and proclaim, “Behold, God’s love for you.” The Showbread consisted of 12 loaves, which were replaced every week. The old ones would be eaten by the priests—and them only.

The pilgrims sensed something big was happening as they ate the barley loaves. So they followed Jesus to the other side of the water. This was a major move: the Sea of Galilee is big and the crossing rough and risky. They probably knew they couldn’t go back and resume their trek to Jerusalem. When they stepped ashore on the other side, they had in effect come to

Jesus in place of the Temple. In Jesus, they in effect beheld the Bread of the Presence—and they ate it, not just the priests.

Jesus says, “You followed me because you want more bread—you’re still hungry.” Well, they are, but the miracle by the sea reminds them of the manna that fed Israel in the desert. Ancient Jews believed that the manna was supernatural, a copy or image of the true heavenly manna, just as the Temple in Jerusalem was a visible, material sign of the true heavenly Temple, and the Showbread of God’s presence.

Jesus tells them that they may want more food for the body, but what they really need is the bread of God that gives life to the world. This is really why they followed Jesus across the water: “Sir, give us this bread always” (Exodus 34.23). Jesus tells them directly—I am the true heavenly manna; I am the bread of God that gives life to the world. In him they will find the true Bread of the Presence, the face of God, for as he said in Matthew, “I tell you, something greater than the Temple is here” (Matthew 12.6). If you really want this, he says, you must believe in the one

God has sent. Some begin to pull back, especially his neighbors. What? This is Joe's kid. We know his family.

Jesus restates his claim in stronger language: I am the living bread; eat this bread and live; and this bread is my flesh that I give for the life of the world. I think the pilgrims grasp that Jesus is alluding to the practice of sacrifice common to both Jews and pagans at the time, where God is present in the sacrifice and among the people sharing the meat in a communal feast. Though he may have his passion in mind, I think Jesus is saying that they will find God if they intimately engage with him.

Eat my flesh. To the ancients, flesh meant humanity. Jesus is saying that God is fully present in his full humanity. Drink my blood. In Jewish thought, blood stands for life. Jesus is saying, as scholar William Barclay paraphrases, "You must drink my blood—you must take my life into the very center of your being—and that life of mine is the life which belongs to God."

Later Jesus gives them a clue to understanding him: "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words

that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6.63). Make me the one thing in your life, and your life will know no limits. That is what Jesus is offering here. As one saint said, the Lord is bread, because the "leaven in the dough of our humanity was baked through and through by the fire of his divinity. He is the bread not of this ordinary life, but of a very different kind of life which death will never cut short." Jesus refuses artificial limits on how magnificent his followers can become; he denies negative descriptions of his beloved children. Jesus is inviting us into a new kind of life, one in which we allow ourselves to be transformed by grace, one in which all we have to do is accept that we are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than we are and the name of which we do not know. As theologian Paul Tillich said, we do not need to do anything, seek anything, perform anything, intend anything: just accept that we are accepted, loved without condition or limit.

This grace infuses our ordinary life. Like Jesus in most of his life, we are asked to live our ordinary lives—eating, sleeping, working, living with others and being in

solitude. We are asked to live our lives with the love Jesus gives us through the Holy Spirit.

And we do not live alone, for we live our lives as followers of Jesus in community. Community is always there: the 5,000 pilgrims shared a common meal; priests and people feast on the meat from a sacrifice. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1Cor. 10.17). The Eucharist feeds us with the bread of life so that we may be the body of Christ in the world. When Saint Augustine gave communion to the newly baptized, he would present the consecrated host to them and say: “Receive what you are.”

We become the bread of life to others in our lives. How we give that bread away is the calling we seek to discern. Often, we live our calling just where we are day to

day. Observing Lee Child’s outsized hero, Jack Reacher, helping yet another ordinary guy in dire straits, a police officer asks him, “Why are you going to all this trouble? What’s he to you?” Someone’s got to help him, Reacher replies.

“And that someone’s you?”

“I guess so.”

“Why is that?”

“I’m the one who’s here.”

Where is your “here?” Wherever or whatever your calling is, join me in a prayer I pray every morning: God, bless us with every grace and blessing we need to live the calling we have received, through Jesus, our peace. Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL