



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 18, 2024  
PROVERBS 9:1-6; PSALM 34:9-14; EPHESIANS 5:15-20; JOHN 6:51-58

## SACRAMENTAL COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

**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."*]

Lloyd was eighty-four, dying of cancer, in constant pain. He lived alone in a one-bedroom senior housing high-rise apartment in downtown Austin, Texas; he had no family around to care for him, and

his sight and hearing had eroded to the point that he no longer drove. All of which is to say, he was lonely and isolated.

I was assigned to be his hospice chaplain while I was in seminary, and he wanted

me to visit regularly, but then he would keep the conversation at veneer level. We'd talk about the weather, about the news headlines, about sports, but any attempt on my part to delve more deeply would be deflected by this gentle man. He would wrap up the visit, thanking me for coming. A polite dismissal, but then each time he would ask to schedule the next visit.

This went on for several visits: his obvious pleasure in my being there with him, his brushing me off anytime I tried to take the conversation to more meaty matters, and his asking me back again. At some point which in hindsight I can only say was the Spirit at work, not me, I asked if during our next visit he might want to go out to breakfast. He was delighted with the invitation.

For the next four months until he died, Lloyd and I went to breakfast whenever I visited, and a trust developed. Over food, we shared our stories with each other. Real stories—the ones that lend meaning to our lives.

The food was nothing special—his preference was biscuits and gravy at

IHOP—and he could eat only a few bites due to his cancer causing severe abdominal distention. But what I know in my bones is that our breakfasts were sacramental, holy. Bread shared as communion really—the food was an outward and visible sign of something much deeper, and we feasted on God's rich blessing. I suspect most of us have such stories of ordinary meals made sacred.

I think this is what Jesus is talking about in the gospel this morning.

For the last few weeks, the gospel readings have been full of mystery and metaphor. Bread of life, living bread, living forever. Bread is the tangible element in the conversation Jesus has with this gathering in the synagogue at Capernaum, but surely we can see that Jesus is talking about much more than what we put in our mouths.

Up till now he has been talking about eating the bread of life, and the people are saying, "Yeah, we want that."

And then Jesus starts talking about eating flesh and drinking blood. The people, his disciples included, get very

uncomfortable. Some are so outraged that they scoff at Jesus and walk away. It is difficult, even disturbing, to hear this imagery that leans toward cannibalism. It was then, and it is now. So what are we to make of it?

Jesus' words are ripe with sacramental images—that the outward and visible sign of bread points to the inward and spiritual grace of God's presence in our midst and within us. Jesus is offering a reassuring word that God provides a clear and present hope in an otherwise bewildering world. The connection is made, between heaven and earth, between God and Jesus and us, between the ordinary and the sacred...and it is made in earthy, fleshy ways—we are what we eat.

At some level, we know this to be physiologically and metabolically true—that what we eat is integrated into our very substance.

Jesus invites us to dwell in him, and he in us. To embody what it means to be his companions on this earthly pilgrimage.

If we believe what Jesus is saying, then to eat of this bread and drink of this cup is to say that we trust God—not just in some

rational, intellectual way, but with *our* whole being, ourselves, our souls and bodies—to entrust our lives to God, as Jesus did. To be Sacraments to the world in our own right, set apart for a purpose, yet that purpose involves the work of unifying, of blessing, and of peace—all in the name of God our Creator.

The really hard part, it seems to me, is not so much the task of swallowing this imagery of eating flesh and drinking blood; the really hard part is the sacramental willingness to be so connected with God and with Jesus that we, too, offer ourselves, as the Body of Christ in this famished world, to be taken, blessed, broken, and given, as outward and visible signs of the grace that God offers to the whole creation and to all humanity.

One way of speaking of this sacramental way of being in the world is to use St. Paul's exhortation to be "in Christ," which is to say, to be so wholly trusting of God in Christ that we discover the essence of God's goodness within ourselves. Our flesh is fulfilled by the indwelling of the Spirit such that the fruits of the spirit emanate from this life "in Christ." It is a

remarkably liberating way of being, but it is not we ourselves that we proclaim, but Christ Jesus in us.

Lloyd died while I was out of town, and another chaplain attended him at his death. I didn't really get to say goodbye, but I recall these many years later how our meals became the point of connection. Living bread.

During our last breakfast together, Lloyd pre-empted my normal prayer with his own. He gave thanks to God for his life, for the food we were about to eat, and for me and the gift of this friendship. It was as rich a blessing as I've ever experienced.

May our earthly journey be one of fleshy goodness, sacramental beauty, and blessed experience of connection.



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