

Weekend of Sunday, August 26, 2018
14th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 21/Proper 16/Year B
Primary Text: John 6:56-69
Sermon Title: "You Have the Words of Eternal Life"

Theme

The "hard saying" that offends Jesus' disciples is his claim that his followers must eat his flesh and drink his blood. The followers who return to their old lives know something about how odd this sounds. Simon Peter, on the other hand, knows something about the scarcity of living, gracious words. He asks the most important question: "To whom shall we go?"

Text

⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This 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." ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But 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. ⁶⁵And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Sermon

I have good news to tell! This is the last week that we will be in John 6!

Now if you are the kind of person that really pays attention to the preacher then you might have noticed that our gospel readings have been dithering over John 6 since July 29 – five weeks in one chapter. So if you think that you have heard me preach on the feeding of the five-thousand and the controversy that this miracle stirred up several weeks in a row, well you are right on. And if you are tired of hearing me talk about, I'd just like to ask you to put yourself in my shoes for a moment – I have to attempt to creatively illuminate nearly the same story each week!

It all started innocuously enough with Jesus wanting some time alone with his disciples and so they leave the crowd that seemed to be following Jesus everywhere he goes by crossing the sea of Galilee. But the crowd followed him on foot along the shore so that when they arrived on the other side, there they were. John records that the people followed him ²“because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.”

Being that this is only the sixth chapter of John, I think it is pretty safe to say that opinions of just who Jesus is and what he stands for are not yet well-formed by the general public. But as we shall see from the reading for today, some are getting it.

John isn't very specific about what Jesus did with the people there on the mountainside, but I think it is safe to presume that he spent the day preaching and teaching and performing sign and miracles like he did everywhere else he went. The day got long and according to John's story it was Jesus who began to get concerned about how all these people were going to get fed way out there in the wilderness. However, John also mentions that Jesus set the seed of concern among his disciples ⁶“to test them, for he himself knew what he was going to do.”

Well, you know how the story went; the disciples scrounged around and all they came up with was five loaves of bread and two fish – and ironically enough it was a little boy who had them!

Undaunted by their lack of provisions Jesus ordered the crowd to be seated and then took what little they had and gave thanks to God for it and asked God to bless it and

then he, according to John, distributed it among the crowd himself. And it was during that distribution that a miracle happened: all were satisfied and then when Jesus ordered the leftovers to be gathered, well, there were more leftovers than he started with!

Now in the other gospel versions of this story, the crowd remained unaware of what had happened among them, but not in John. According to John the crowd was fully aware of what they had just witnessed and they wanted to take Jesus by force and make him their king! After all, who wouldn't want a king that could provide for his people? Who wouldn't want a king who would do the bidding of his people? Furthermore, we need to remember that the vast majority of the people in the crowd were no doubt peasants. People who might just have been fed up (no pun intended) with the religious establishment who thought the best rule to live by was to live copacetically with their Roman overlords and keep doing things the way they had for years

Moving on. That evening Jesus sent the disciples across the sea again this time without him. And it was while they were out in the sea at night a storm came up and tossed them about. They were struggling when they saw Jesus walking toward them on the water! He got in the boat, calmed the sea, and they instantly arrived on the other side.

Oh and by the way, the crowd Jesus fed, they knew that the disciples had left together in one boat. The next morning they noticed that Jesus wasn't with them anymore they went out looking for him. And when they found him and his disciples in Capernaum they asked him how he got there.

Now I appreciate you hanging with me as I did some review. It was necessary because it all plays into what happens next and culminates in the reading for today.

In the next 59 verses what we find was Jesus having to explain the significance of all that had happened on that mountainside. You see there was much more to it than the feeding of five thousand people. Jesus explained that the real bread that they fed on that day wasn't really the five barley loaves - but he himself.

Imagine being there and hearing that. Well, that's just crazy talk!

It's not really clear how much time had passed in chapter six, but over that time period, Jesus called himself the true bread, and the bread come down from heaven, and the bread of God, the bread of life, the living bread, a slice of bread, the best thing since sliced bread, bread and jam – ok I made a couple of those up. But then I think he took this food metaphor a little too far when he said, “If you want to live eternally with God in heaven then you have to eat me. You have to eat my flesh and drink my blood.” Imagine being there and hearing that!

Is it any wonder that some people got upset. We sit here in this church with two thousand years of Christian history behind us and we kind of think we know what he meant when he said those things. Imagine being there and hearing those claims for the very first time. Would you? Could you? Believe in him?

Jesus knew that was the subject of discussion around him. Many of his own disciples said to one another ⁶⁰“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you?”

They didn't answer but I can. Yes! I find this language offensive and disgusting. We do not eat the body and drink the blood of another human being!

And as the conversation continued many of his would-be disciples fell away. He told them too much, perhaps they sensed that the cost of discipleship will be too high. Jesus turned and looked at the rest and asked them, ⁶⁷“Do you also wish to go away?” And in what I think is his greatest moment of spiritual enlightenment, ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Perhaps it was the profound teaching, perhaps it was the counter-cultural message of God's love for all people. Maybe it was the healings and the miracles. Maybe it was his ability to do amazing things like walk on water. I suspect it was the sum total of their experience of Jesus, but in that moment Peter speaks for all of us who gather in places of worship each week, who have messed things up and lost hope and are broken in some way and who need to hear a word of grace, when he says, “Where else could we turn? No one else can make this all turn out ok in the end. No matter what we have made of this life, it is our belief that faith in you, Lord

Jesus, will make it all complete and whole and right and if not in this life then in the life to come. We have come to this conclusion Lord; you are the only one who can do all that. We'll will continue to follow you, Jesus. If you'll have us."

If only they knew how accurately he spoke of himself. Its only chapter six of John's gospel, but eventually Jesus would repeat similar words in a scene with just his closest twelve friends.

On that night he took bread again and said, "take and eat, this is my body broken for you. Take and drink, this cup contains my blood poured out for all people for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you do, in remembrance of me, for I will not share this meal with you again until we can all celebrate it together in my Father's perfect kingdom in Heaven.

You know I have a confession to make. Sometimes this stuff is difficult for me to believe. I hope that doesn't shock you – an ordained minister of the church admitting moments of insecurity in his faith. But let's face it, some of the things Jesus says are just downright bizarre!

It's in those moments when I have to shake myself and in the midst of my imperfect faith, and say to myself, I want to believe because there is no better deal out there. As sinful and messed up as I am, I need for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be true or I would just be hopeless.

So if the rhetoric on Sunday morning has gotten you all confused and is sometimes hard to believe, know this, you aren't alone. If you can find a better deal, take it. But I stand with Peter and confess: ⁶⁸"Lord, to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." And everything will turn out ok.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Prayer

Lord God, we admit that we often don't have the spiritual maturity to hear and understand everything your Son has taught us. And at the same time, Lord God, life is often ambiguous. Our culture hawks numerous answers to the questions of life and offers up endless claims to happiness. And yet our experience is that they

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all leave us empty and hungry for the things that really matter. We want to believe that Jesus is bread of life, the bread come down from heaven, the bread which satisfies eternally. Help us in our times of disbelief that through communion with him we might truly become one with you and one with each other. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen