

Understanding

When we began a month ago with John's take on the miracle of the loaves, also known as the feeding of the 5000, we recalled that this is the only miracle to be found in all four gospels.

Which is like putting up a big billboard that says:

Pay Attention!

This Matters!

In the other gospels, they look back at this miracle just briefly.

In Mark, when the whole crew almost drowns just a few hours after the 5000 are fed, when Jesus comes walking on the water, telling the winds to quiet down, the comment at the end of that story is:

"They didn't understand about the loaves."

Similarly, in Matthew's gospel, when Jesus teaches his disciples to "beware the yeast of the Pharisees," the disciples respond with: "Hey, did we forget to buy bread?"

To which Jesus responds:

"Idiots!

Don't you remember the 5000 who were fed?"

And maybe you and I are sitting here this morning, along with those first disciples, as we all of us together say:

"Huh?!"

And that's, perhaps, where John comes in.

John doesn't reflect on the feeding of the 5000 with a one liner.

John spends one of the longest chapters in his gospel on this central mystery of our faith.

We spend 5 Sundays in a row, during the dog days of summer, walking with John as he lifts stones and cracks open pieces of wood, whispering to us (if we have the ears to hear), why it matters that Jesus is the bread of life.

We don't get a logical argument that ties everything up with a neat bow on top.

We don't get a straight forward explanation of any kind.

Instead, what we get is an invitation.

To step inside a new way of seeing.

A new way of hearing.

And a new way of living.

One that, if we persist, in openness and surrender, allows us to encounter wonders that have always hung around our pathways, but which we were unable to see.

To get to that point, we need to start with some basic questions.

The first of which is:

What does it mean to be Christian?

There are as many answers as there are varieties of Christians.

Our evangelical friends say: Accept Jesus as your savior, and you are saved!

Our Pentecostal friends say: Get bathed in the Holy Spirit, and you will be saved!

And we in the liturgical and orthodox tradition, say: Show up each Sunday, receive Holy Communion, and you are saved!

But it seems that John's gospel is saying to all of us: not so fast!

As I mentioned at the outset, we are in the fourth of five Sundays as John's gospel mulls over, like kneading dough, this sense, this mystery, of Jesus as the bread of life.

Is that why your eyes are starting to glaze over?!

Because of all the repetition?

Perhaps.

Except today, maybe you're also feeling the need for some Pepto-Bismol!

Since today's gospel sounds like an advertisement for cannibalism!

Eat my flesh!

Drink my blood!

It's one thing to talk about Jesus as bread.

But Jesus as lunch?!

This grisly image is far removed from simply welcoming Jesus into your heart.

It demands more than the ecstasy of speaking in tongues, or the predictable pace of our Sunday Mass.

Which leads to question number 2:

What does it mean to eat the flesh and blood of Jesus?

The Greek word Jesus uses today for "eat" isn't about fine dining with three different forks and lace napkins.

The word he uses means, to "gnaw."

Think of a dog with his bone.

Gnawing is a slow process.

To gnaw on something takes time.

And a commitment that leads the one doing the gnawing to really get to know what's being gnawed on.

Its' taste.

Its' texture.

Its' essence.

Perhaps it's not enough to welcome Jesus into our hearts.

Perhaps it's not enough to simply get stirred up with emotion.

Perhaps it's not enough to take even the bread and cup every week.

Instead, Jesus seems to be saying, "if you want to follow me, sink your teeth into me."

Be joined to me!

Because when you are, you can change your mind.

About everything!

And only a changed mind can glimpse the kingdom of God.

Only a changed mind can set the necessary stage for letting go.

For surrender.

For rejecting the siren calls of power and security.

For releasing feelings of anxiety and fear.

Sink your teeth into Jesus, and return to God's vision for this beautiful world.

Sink your teeth into Jesus, and muster the courage to confront predator priests and politicians who need tremendous help to regain basic human decency.

Sink your teeth into Jesus, and you'll find the courage to leave an abusive relationship.

Sink your teeth into Jesus, and exchange a dry, intellectual faith for a faith that challenges us to help heal this broken world!

A world literally dying, for a compassionate touch, a kind word.

Sink your teeth into Jesus, and watch grief and resentment yield to hope, understanding and forgiveness.

Does any of this really matter beyond our own highly personal sense of wellbeing?

The question answers itself.

Last week, scientists issued yet another warning that climate change is here, caused by human industrial activity, and we are fast approaching tipping points where things may go from irreversibly bad to worse – to catastrophic.

These clarion calls have been shouted out since the 1970's.

Sadly, we have ears, but we don't hear.

Just down the road, several hundred folks held a noisy demonstration last Monday at City Hall.

They're mad about having to wear masks!

They hate the vaccine!

These protesters want their freedom.

But don't be too tough on them.

How many of us continue to drive gas powered cars?

Invest in oil stocks?

And pray for a growing economy – that is quickly making the earth uninhabitable?

We resist change because it's hard and often ends in seeming failure.

But we're in good company!

Next week John wraps up this long “bread of life” chapter.

It ends with nearly every follower of Jesus quitting – and going home!

They can't imagine the complete about-face that the kingdom requires.

So, a few decades after the crucifixion, Rome destroys Israel since her people said “no thanks” to Jesus' way of solidarity, love and non-violence.

Today, will history repeat itself?

As thousands of the unvaccinated die in maxed-out hospitals?

As climate change causes unimaginable heatwaves and wildfires?

As a near collapsing Gulf Stream threatens a new ice age in some parts of the world?

Which returns us to the question we began with.

What is it about these Loaves?

What are we missing?

Might it be this?

That the feeding of the multitude is a sign and wonder that points to the Reliability, Trustworthiness, and Reality of God.

If we can only come to embrace that, perhaps we can live in the way that Jesus keeps trying to show us.

Surrendering our anxieties and fears.

Changing the current path toward destruction that we are now running toward.

Are we willing to change?

Are we willing to do the hard work of creating a life — that is life?

Rather than the life we have today?

Which is usually about money.

Comfort.

The status quo.

And death.

Funny how Jesus never demands that folks listen to his message.

Instead, he simply lives it, to the very end.

Serving.

Loving.

Forgiving and healing.

Perhaps we who claim not simply to admire him, but to follow him, can also do the same.

Hoping that hearts will soften.

Praying for ears that will not only hear, but actually listen.

Paul is quite right today to warn us:

“Be careful how you live.

Not as unwise people – but as wise.

Making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” Eph. 5:15.

Today, more than ever before, we need to gnaw on Jesus.

+amen

