

Gnawing on Jesus - Part II

We are today at the end of our five week journey with St. John, who has, week in and week out, patiently and gently yet insistently and with gruesome examples helped us to understand what it means for Jesus to be the bread of life.

To help in that journey, we have put away our little white wafers and instead have real bread, made with love and care by Barbara and Niambi, to consecrate and share.

And while we tend to be "dippers" here at St E's, our Bishop has urged us to actually drink from the cup, or, as Jesus insists in the original Greek, to "gulp" this consecrated blood of our Lord, when you come forward to the altar rail.

Last week I got a kick out of some of the comments about the bread we shared.

"It's like a potato chip!" one anonymous person remarked!

"It's huge!"

"It's chewy!"

One thing that I hope you come to see as week in and week out you take a real piece of bread in your hand is that every piece is different: in size, in texture; in taste.

Some is brittle, some soft, others flat or round....these pieces of bread, all so different, yet all broken pieces from a single loaf.

These pieces of bread are you and I.

We are all different, yet we all come from exactly the same place - we are all different, yet we will return to the same place.

These different pieces of bread also represent something else.

Think of your experiences with Jesus.

For some, you may still be waiting to encounter him.

Others may have felt his quiet presence or his silent whisper, but, in whatever way he comes to you, he comes to you as a uniquely individual child of God.

When I look at the bread broken and shared, I see Jesus encountering each of you in a different way – in a way that you can hear, in a way that you can see, because of your own past experience or trauma or joys or hopes.

The problem with the tiny white wafer as our usual communion bread is that it suggests that Jesus looks the same to everyone; and that we look the same to Jesus.

Pulling out real bread reminds us of the truth that your relationship with Jesus, and his with you, is as personal as your favorite teeshirt, as unique as your own smile.

And there is something else about the real bread.

You gotta work at it.

Whether you've got good teeth or bad, whether you've got all of your teeth or none of them, some of that bread is tough, some is chewy, and once you've swallowed, you know you had something to eat.

That's what John is getting at in today's very thick gospel lesson.

Here's Jesus, having just come back from feeding 5000 people.

All 5000 are ready to sign a pledge card; all are just waiting to become card carrying Episcopalians; when here comes Jesus to stick a pin in that rapidly inflating balloon.

Our churches today are so caught up with church growth, adding to our numbers, increasing the cash flow, that we often forget that Jesus was the worst church growth coordinator of all time!

He started with 12 and ended up with 11.

Even more amazing, when he's got over 5000 ready to sign on the dotted line, and all he needs to do is sweet talk them with a little "I am gentle and my burden is light"; and maybe some "blessed are the meek, the humble, the mourners," -- when that's all he has to do to seal the deal -- lo and behold: he won't do it!

Instead -- he starts telling them to chew on his flesh; to gulp his blood; and when people's faces start turning green, he doesn't switch gears, he says it again!

For modern folks like us, this kind of talk is hard to take.

But imagine back then.

We're talking Jewish people whose law forbids the drinking of even an animal's blood, much less human blood; whose law forbids eating many kinds of animal flesh, much less human flesh.

Is it any wonder that having listened to all of this: "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him...."

And by the way, as we discussed last week, the original Greek for "eating" as in to "eat the flesh of the Lord," is better translated not as "eating" but as "gnawing."

Gnawing, like a dog worrying a bone.

Gnawing, like your life depends on it.

Gnawing, so that that which is being gnawed; and the one who is doing the gnawing; become linked to one another, fused, life united to life.

If you're finding some of this tough to swallow (the pun is definitely intended!), don't look at me: take it up with Jesus!

Because when we encounter real human life and the God who enters our human life in all of its wonder AND in all of its tragedy, the safe God we so willy-nilly put on the shelf is suddenly transformed into the God who insists on having us lock, stock and barrel.

And today, the choice is whether to follow Jesus, or follow the siren songs of power and wealth and fame.

Two thousand years ago, Pontius Pilate famously demanded of Jesus: "What is truth?"

Last week, another powerful man, Rudy Giuliani, the president's lawyer, made a statement that may also live in infamy, declaring that:

"Truth is not truth!"

This came on the heels of yet another devastating report involving our Roman Catholic friends and the systemic sexual abuse of children by priests and the decades long cover ups by bishops of these crimes.

We Anglicans have a deep affection for our Roman friends, particularly the many of us who identify as Anglo-Catholic, and to witness these disclosures yet again is heartbreaking and infuriating.

Add to these abominations the daily Twitter war our president is engaged in against just about every institution in our government,

against those who oppose him, against many of our people who happen to be people of color.

These tragedies are all the result of rejecting Jesus.

They are the result of choosing the road of power and privilege over the road of self giving love, of humble, mutual, service to one another.

Every time the Christian chooses respectability over reverence for the cross, social status over social service, we find ourselves trapped "by the cosmic powers of this present darkness."

What does it mean then to "come to believe that Jesus is the holy one of God?"

In today's world perhaps it means:

"to cultivate a people who can risk being peaceful in a violent world,

risk being kind in a competitive society,

risk being faithful in an age of cynicism,

risk being gentle among those who admire the tough,

risk love when it may not be returned,

because we have confidence that in Christ

we have been reborn into a new reality." Stanley Hauerwas.

And we can take important steps in this direction by "looking at ourselves, by trying to understand our own violence, and by, bit by bit, becoming better human beings.

Could anything be simpler, or more difficult?" C. Shinn quoting R. Girard, paraphrased.

Today, Jesus invites you and I to see ourselves in the broken pieces of bread that we will share; to see ourselves in the wine made blood.

And in that seeing, Jesus beckons us to see ourselves, no matter our circumstances, no matter our challenges, no matter our faults, as beloved children of this God who is closer to you than your breath; this God, who is nearer to you than your tears.

"Do you too wish to go away," Jesus asks them; asks us?

It is with Peter that we can reply:

"But where can we go Lord?

You have the words of eternal life."

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