

Here we are, stuck in the middle of this argument between Jesus and the crowd and Jesus' nearly unintelligible and rather grotesque assertions about eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Biblical scholars show that behind these verses a controversy rages in the early Church about the nature of the Eucharist, a controversy which John the evangelist is attempting to settle about Jesus giving his own flesh and blood that the world might live.

What does this talk of flesh and blood and heavenly bread and the Eucharist really have to do with the ins and outs, the ups and downs, of everyday living? What does it have to do with the things that really matter, our hopes and fears, loves and hates, our living and our dying? What does it have to do with us, here and now, struggling just to make ends meet?"

Like the crowd, I grow frustrated with Jesus' abstract words about eating and drinking his body and blood when what we really need is something more concrete, meaningful. "How can this man give us his flesh?" they ask. Or, in other words, "Stop talking nonsense, Jesus. We need something a little better than your abstract, metaphorical promises."

To this angry demand, Jesus responds by insisting on the point he has already made. *"I am telling you the truth,"* he says. *"if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in yourselves. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.... For my flesh is the real food; my blood is the real drink."*

Upon hearing these words we realize that he's not speaking abstractly; he really means it. The crowd in Capernaum shrinks back because what Jesus is speaking about is regarded as an abomination by the law and the prophets. And we shrink back because it doesn't fit our sensibilities, and, if we're honest, it's just gross.

Martin Copenhaver, a UCC pastor and prolific writer, describes what happened when one of his parishioners did just this. The communion table was covered in starched linen and set with a silver chalice and paten. The congregation was silent as the minister began to read the words of institution in a solemn tone meant to add dignity to the proceedings. *"On [this] occasion,"* he writes, *when I repeated Jesus' familiar words, This is my body, broken for you; this is my blood, shed for you a small girl suddenly said in a loud voice, Ew, yuk! The congregation looked horrified,"* he continues, *as if someone had splattered blood all over the altar — which, in effect, is just what the little girl had done with her exclamation."*

For the past few weeks, we have looked at this sixth chapter of *The Gospel of John* and connected it to our faith and, particularly, to the sacraments and the way they create and nourish our faith. Today, we encounter the heart of it all. We begin to recognize just what is at stake for Jesus, just how much we are worth to him. In these verses, he offers to us his own flesh and blood, the flesh which will be stretched upon the cross for our sake, the blood which will flow freely from his hands, feet, and side, for our sake.

We have struggled to understand what Jesus means by speaking of the bread of life and the food from heaven. Here, now, this week he makes himself all too plain. Jesus gets all too gritty in his imagery in order to confront us with the claim and promise of the carnal God, the God who becomes incarnate, who takes on flesh, becomes just like us, so that we may one day be like God.

For in Jesus, the Word made flesh, and in the sacraments, the Word given physical, visible form once again, we meet the God who will be satisfied with nothing less than our whole selves. This

is why Jesus speaks of giving us his flesh and blood, for “flesh and blood” is a Hebrew idiom which refers to the whole person, hearts, minds, spirit, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, everything. In Jesus, the whole of God meets us to love, redeem, and sustain the whole of who we are, good, bad, and ugly.

Throughout the Fourth Gospel we encounter some of the most familiar images describing the relationship of Jesus and those who believe in him: Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep; he is the vine, we are the branches; he abides in God and we abide in him. Martin Copenhaver writes, *“In this passage, however, language is pressed to the limits to express the indissoluble union and inextricable participation of one life in another. For those who receive Jesus, the whole Jesus, his life clings to their bones and courses through their veins. He can no more be taken from the believer’s life than last Tuesday’s breakfast can be plucked from one’s body.”*

This is the promise God makes to us in the Sacraments: to be one with us...forever, to stick with us no matter what. Every time we celebrate Eucharist, as Richard Giles puts it, “God always shows up.” God comes to us and offers us a promise made so concrete, we can touch and feel, taste and eat it. In these common physical elements, we have God’s promise that God cares about our births and deaths, our marriages and our jobs, our successes and our failures. What’s more, God has joined God’s own self to us through Christ, the Word made flesh.

Come, eat, and drink this promise. Come meet the God who meets us exactly where we are. Come receive the real food of Christ’s own body, the real drink of Christ’s own blood, that we might have support in living in this so very real and difficult world. Come meet the God who offers us, not just meaning, but life itself, life in Christ both now and forever. In the words of psalmist, “Taste and see; the Lord is good.”

*The Rev. Paul Briggs
13th Sunday After Pentecost
18 August 2024
St. Thomas’ Church, Camden*