

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

A difficult teaching. It was difficult for the early disciples to accept this lesson from Jesus about eating his flesh and living forever -- and it hasn't gotten any easier. We are left with an internal conflict: trying to believe something we may not be able to get our heads around.

As we approach this difficult text, we pause to breathe, to ground ourselves in the moment and prepare ourselves to encounter a story about life and death, faith and doubt, knowledge and trust.

Text

John 6: 51-58

"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.”

Comment

This makes no sense. Let's not even try.

It will cause our heads to hurt and our stomachs to turn if we try too hard to resolve this. 'Whoever eats me will live?' What? Surely Jesus is speaking metaphorically, allegorically. Yet he doubles down: 'My flesh is true bread; my blood is true drink. Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.' Really?

We may want to helpfully contextualise this story by noting that it takes place in less scientific time, when the audience may have grasped what Jesus was saying because of their different and limited worldview, but uh-uh. They weren't buying it, either. This is a difficult teaching, they said. And then they asked: Who can accept it?

Yet it is what Jesus teaches. And so the Christian church has tied itself into knots trying to tame this passage so we can accept it. Accusations of cannibalism dogged early believers as they recited these words in our ancient rites. Theologians have spent centuries explaining the mysteries of transubstantiation and consubstantiation and the mystical presence alive in this sacrament.

It's still weird.

And it speaks to an unavoidable unresolve-ability in this thing called faith. At some point, faith requires faith. At some point, our ability to make logical sense of something divine stops. Faith assumes uncertainty rather than certainty.

What is going on here with the flesh, the blood, the eating, the living forever? We don't know. It is a conflict that remains unresolved within the arena of our minds.

Which is why it's good that this story and this teaching reappears later in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. Unresolveable with words and with thinky-think concepts, the truth Jesus is trying to impart will only begin to make sense with a paired action, with a shared experience, with a participation in a communal meal and in the physical sensation of knowing at a level beyond our intellectual reach that this bread has been broken for the life of the world.

Response

This difficult passage reminds us that sometimes we simply can't talk or think our way out of conflicts.

It may well be more effective to move or feel our way forward by doing something physical, something that taps into our emotional intelligence or our body's innate understanding rather than rely solely on our cognitive sensibilities.

Those who study how trauma affects our bodies' ability to find peace know that lighting a scented candle or drawing a warm bath or listening to a favourite playlist or doing something physical like yoga or taking a walk can allow the body to regulate itself. Unconscious parts of the brain triggered by conflict and trauma may well need to be reset if we are to reconnect in healthy ways with others. And if and when we get stuck mentally or verbally trying to resolve a conflict or solve a problem, it may well be time to let our fuller selves get a chance to make sense of what's going on.

It's good to know that the mystery of the incarnation tells us that our feeble human brains are loved and valued by God -- but it's not just our brains. Our eyes can watch bread be broken; our tongues can taste the wine; our guts can feel what's really going on; our ears and flesh can detect the gathering of God's people together; and our tears form without our control. If we let them, they will help us make sense of what our minds alone will not grasp.

Prayer

God who wants us to understand
lessons of life and death,
and who gives to us in flesh and blood,
bread and wine,
ways to make sense of
our communion with you:
help us receive what we cannot grasp.
Feed our faith in ways
that allow us to taste and see
that life is good
and death is not the end.
Amen.