St. Brendan's Episcopal Church, August 18, 20244 John 6: 51 – 58

Bread. Again

I was honored when Elaine invited me to preach again at St. Brendan – and not just because that meant Nicole and I would be guests at your lobster picnic! Then I looked at the texts for August 18th. Oh no. Not that awful part of John chapter 6. I was tempted to preach on Proverbs 9 – but as I often told my students, "If you read a difficult text you can't pretend nobody heard it. You need to preach on it." You probably know that preachers have sermon files so I checked my file on John 6. Unfortunately, I discovered that I preached on John 6 in August, 2021. Since the lectionary is on a three-year cycle, the texts read today were read in 2021. While my earlier sermon was on the verses just before today's gospel, I had told some stories that I planned to tell today! So I had to start over.

If you've missed the last four Sundays, just a reminder of where we've been. This chapter began with Jesus feeding 5000 people with a boy's lunch. **Only John** tells us about that boy's lunch. **Only John** identifies the bread as "barley loaves." **Only John** goes on for over 60 verses talking about bread. Well, that's a lot of bread. John chapter 6 takes up five summer Sundays from July 28 through August 25th. I think this is why many pastors go on vacation in August!

Only John has no story about Jesus breaking bread with his disciples at the last supper. "Take, eat, this is my body," he said. "Then he took the cup saying, "This is my blood of the new covenant." Instead of bread and cup, John tells the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. **Only John** has that story. So is John chapter 6 John's communion story? Today's reading begins by repeating a verse from last week:

“I am the living bread that comes 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.” (6: 51) The last words — “**my flesh**” — set up the controversy in the verses that follow.

You and I are likely to echo the question asked by the Jews. Just a reminder here that everybody in this text is probably a Jew, including Jesus and his disciples. Only John portrays “the Jews” as a group opposing Jesus. We hear this again in the last verse of this passage – “your ancestors at the bread in the wilderness and they died.” Why didn’t Jesus say, “<u>our</u> ancestors” because they were also Jesus’ ancestors? That’s a question too big for this sermon! But their question here is one we could ask: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Regular church goers have become so accustomed to hearing, “The body of Christ given for you” and “The blood of Christ shed for you” that the strangeness has worn off. **Today’s gospel brings the strangeness back into focus.** Many people outside the church and perhaps many of us within, can relate to a small sign that traveled around the internet. It looked like one of those refrigerator magnets about lobsters on sale in many Maine shops. This sign pictures a mother with her grade-school age son. She’s looking down at him, responding to something he must have said to her:

> “No, sweetheart. Jesus rose from the dead but he’s not a zombie.
> And we drink Jesus’ blood, but we’re not vampires.
> Let’s go have ice cream”

That is, let’s change the subject. It’s not surprising that this boy would imagine Jesus as a zombie or that drinking blood would remind him of vampires. Television, movies and video games have probably shaped his world more than the Bible. But the boy on the

little sign could have asked the question in the text: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” After all, Jesus is standing right there talking to the people who asked the question. He isn’t asking people to come up and bite into him.

If this chapter is John’s communion text, controversies about bread and flesh have carried over into communities of believers long after this chapter. The Church has been asking questions about the bread for centuries. Is Christ present in the bread? If so, how? Does the bread become something other than bread? Can we eat the bread with those who don't believe what we believe about the bread? These questions continue to divide Roman Catholics from Protestants, as well as dividing Protestants from each other. **It is at the table where the bread is broken that our churches have been most broken,** cut off from one another, suspicious and judgmental of each other. Why? Some say it is to protect the sacrament of communion, to protect the very presence of Jesus. Do communion and Jesus need protecting? After years of ecumenical dialogues, Lutheran and Reformed churches finally reached an agreement for "full communion" in 1997. One of the background documents that led to this agreement dealt with how Christ was present in the sacrament:

> Both Lutheran and Reformed churches affirm that Christ himself is truly present and received in the Supper. Neither church professes to explain how this is so. [1]

That same year we Lutherans said “no” to full communion with Episcopalians. The proposal needed two-thirds vote and it failed. It would take another two years for the ELCA to approve full communion with the Episcopal church. If the ELCA hadn’t approved full communion in 1999, ratified by the Episcopalians in 2000, then a Lutheran pastor named Elaine Hewes could not

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[1] *An Invitation to Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983) 14

break bread with you at this table.

"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Ecumenical agreements didn't answer that question. But the eating and drinking are important: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood **abide** in me, and I in them." Jesus longs to abide with us – that word *meno* in Greek can mean to dwell with us, to remain with us, to be present with us. Jesus' promise to abide is found **40 times** in John's gospel.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood **abide** in me, and I in them**."** It's the physicality of flesh and blood that is so disgusting. But so important. We need to remember John told us in the very first chapter of this gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The philosophers and theologians nodded: YES we know this Word/*logos* we call it. Logos, perfect world beyond our earthly existence, creator of all that is, eternal idea. YES, they said and moved their chairs closer to listen. The gospel writer went on until he said something very strange: "The Word – eternal, perfect, beyond us **– the Word became flesh** and lived among us." NO that cannot be, they said. NO, that Word cannot become flesh. Too earthy. Too touchable. Too imperfect. Jesus is the Word made flesh. *Touch your hand. Touch your face. Flesh.*

Sometimes a poet can help us see from a new angle. We know that Elaine is a poet and her sermons are often poems that awaken us. Steve Garnaas Holmes is also a poet. He's a retired Methodist minister who wrestles with lectionary texts until they become poems. Hear a few lines of his poem on this John text:

> God is not a god of hearsay,
> a virtual god, an outsourced god.
> No remote, second hand, copy-of-a-copy god…
> Not an idea you can think about.
> This religion isn't a recipe; it's the meal.
> Real food. You digest it.

Jesus is not explaining God. He's feeding us God.
He is the bread of God…

Take him in, this Jesus bread.
Savor the aroma of his love, his grace,
the flavor of his trust in God and in you.
Bite off a chunk of that forgiveness,
chew it gratefully, and swallow it all.
Drink in that presence with you in every Gethsemane,
every Golgotha, drink it in and let it fill you.

Take all of who Jesus is into yourself.
Stuff yourself with him.

You are what you eat.

So it is that we become Jesus' body in and for the world. The Word becomes flesh in us. We will hear this again after we have shared the bread and the cup. Elaine will look at us and say: "*And now may the Presence of Jesus, in whatever form it has come to you this morning, nourish you in grace, comfort you in love, and inspire you to be Christ's presence in the world.*

So may it be. Amen

Barbara K. Lundblad