

John 6:51-59 (including vs. 59)

<sup>51</sup>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.”

<sup>52</sup>The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” <sup>53</sup>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.<sup>54</sup> Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; <sup>55</sup>for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.<sup>56</sup> Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.<sup>57</sup> Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup>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.” <sup>59</sup>He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

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**John 6: 51-59**

**Communion: Eat This Bread!**

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On Tuesday at a called meeting, the body of the Presbytery examined a candidate for ordination. She preached a sermon, and was asked several questions about her beliefs. As is common practice, one of the questions had to do with the Sacraments, specifically Communion. What does it mean to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the Reformed tradition?

She gave the standard Presbyterian answers, as one is inclined to do in order to pass the test and get a job. We believe that Jesus isn't physically present, but spiritually present in the bread and wine. We believe that baptism is an initiation into God's grace, and celebrating communion deepens our relationship with God as we remember Jesus' ultimate sacrifice for our sakes. I'm paraphrasing her answer, but it was a "by the book" response. Good thinking. Anything veering too far off the standard only invites more questions. Best to get that ordeal over with than have to explain too much!

But what if it had been Jesus who was trying to get a job in the Presbytery of the James? If he voiced the typical words of Institution that we know from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and that we use EVERY time we celebrate communion – he'd probably be safe. "Whenever you eat this bread or drink this cup – do this in remembrance of me." We like the orderliness of remembrance. The ritual practice makes sense to us. We eat, and we drink, so that we will remember. We repeat the words because we are a wordy kind of denomination. Words can be ordered, remembered, repeated. The bread and wine have not been quite as central to our

tradition. For a long time, the *Book of Order* required that the Lord's Supper would be celebrated AT LEAST four times each year – because for whatever reason – it had become separated from the weekly service and a rarity in worship. Preaching became the big deal. Sacraments were occasional, a little too much voodoo for us because it involved something other than our cerebral connection to the texts we hold so dear.

However, let's imagine for a moment that it is the Jesus represented by John's gospel who is standing up at Presbytery to answer questions about the Lord's Supper. He did, after all, preach and teach these unusual lessons in the synagogue at Capernaum, which was a center of learning located in one of the larger sea towns by Galilee.

“So Jesus,” the Committee on Ministry representative begins, “Tell us about this Sacrament.” What do you have to say to us decent and orderly Presbyterians about Your Supper? And then Jesus says things like: *Whoever eats of this bread will live forever. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 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. Whoever eats me will live because of me.*

Do you think he'd get the job? I know it takes a lot for Presbyteries to say “no” to a candidate, but I suspect that even the more open-minded delegates to the meeting would be scratching their heads. The ones giving him the benefit of the doubt would be asking, “Surely Jesus, that's meant to be a metaphor, right? You don't *really* mean that we're supposed to eat your flesh and drink your blood in a weirdly cannibalistic kind of way?”

But then, he wouldn't quite answer that question. He would leave us hanging, just like he left the Jews at the synagogue who were asking the same thing. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" This is too strange. The words don't make sense, and it's telling that as this chapter finishes out, many of his disciples leave him, that is, except for the 12 that Jesus puts on the spot about staying. This teaching is too difficult, too unacceptable. It was already out of the comfort zone for those who saw him teach face to face. Even more so, we who are so far removed from Jesus' walk here on earth dismiss his teachings that make us squirm.

The Roman Catholic tradition comes a little more close to embracing this teaching of Jesus than we do. Doctrinally, they still believe in "transubstantiation." What that means is that their standard answer to the question, "What do you believe happens in the Lord's Supper?" is that they believe that the bread and wine actually become the physical body and blood of Christ. That's the reason they are so much more protective and guarded about who gets to take communion than we are. That's why you may be told that if you're not Catholic, you can receive a blessing from the priest but not actual communion.

So is there a "right" answer? Is there a belief that is more true? Does Jesus really mean remember me, or does he mean eat my flesh and drink my blood? Here in lies the challenge of interpreting scripture and tradition. We have such a wide range of possibilities. But sometimes in examining that breadth we learn new things rather than just repeating the same old things. Our standard answers become that for a wide range of reasons – but mostly to distinguish "us" from "them." What if we were to go beyond our standard answers and allow the weird and strange interpretations to speak to us? What if we were among Jesus' twelve, the innermost circle, and had to make sense of this teaching or else wander off like so many chose to do?

Going deeper in our faith means taking risks. Those risks are not only about the things that we do, they are about what and how we choose to believe. We can assume that the standard answers are all that applies to us, OR we can allow the larger tradition, the whole of Christianity, meaning the mystical parts as well as the parts we already know to shape and form who we are.

I'm not all that comfortable with Jesus talking as he does in this chapter. My go-to has always been about the remembering. Remembering is something we know how to do, that we can do. We can study and learn and dissect the whole story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and then see it in light of this ritual meal. We have the words, and I've learned to trust in the words. I'm frightened by the consuming nature of this relationship that Jesus shares in this teaching. In this text, Jesus asks us not just to remember when we take communion, but to be consumed with him, to consume his real being, and then to live in him, and he will live in us. It makes this a meal of not just remembering, but deciding to be more like Jesus in our day to day living. If I eat his flesh, will my body also be betrayed and broken? If I drink his blood, am I required to be as forgiving of my enemies as he was of his enemies? Becoming like Jesus seems radically more terrifying than remembering what he did. Living forever sounds like a wonderful promise, but also a scary responsibility. Can I allow my life to be so entwined in Jesus that I am all consumed by his very nature?

Sounds like a lot for practical Presbyterians. And that's because it is. Those who had been listening when he fed the hungry crowds with real bread and real fish were already starting to turn away. Only the inner circle remains, and they have their doubts too. At the end of this chapter, Jesus asks his circle, "Do you wish to go away?" and Peter response, "To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." He chose them, not because they had no doubts, but because they were willing to

listen beyond their doubts. They would keep striving – even with the hardest of the teachings – and only one would drop away. That one was even allowed to stay and continue hearing the words of the deeper path.

Now, I'm not saying that Presbyterians only ever stay on the surface of their faith. To pigeon-hole an entire group because of their common doctrine does not allow for the living breathing nature of a tradition, which happens as individuals experience their own interpretation and growth. We do characterize ourselves by the company we keep, and yet, we are not bound necessarily by that community's boundaries. We can embrace them and still grow around and over and through them. We all have to start somewhere, and a great studier of religion, Joseph Campbell reminds us that it can be best to start with the faith we learned as children. In the book Man Seeks God, by Eric Weiner, he quotes Campbell, saying that evasion of our childhood spiritual tradition would be futile. "We never fully escape our indigenous mythology, Campbell says, nor should we. 'It's a good thing to hang on to the myth that was put in you when you were a child, because it is there whether you want it there or not. What you have to do is translate that myth into eloquence... You have to learn to hear it's song.'" (Weiner, p. 294)

Reading and studying scripture is all well and good. It can be helpful to do so. But the myth, the divine truth encapsulated in ancient stories, will sing for us when we can suspend our judgments and allow ourselves to go deeper, to reach beyond our normal, by the book answers for the mystical Jesus who calls us to consume him body and soul. I must admit, it's a weird one, a challenging one, a teaching I cannot claim that I understand fully. I can only claim that my own willingness to be fully understood and fully known by the Jesus who has a claim on my own spiritual journey.

I began my own journey as a small church Presbyterian. I was taught all the standard answers, and by the grace of God, I was allowed to push back on those answers with a multitude of questions. That helped. That's probably why I'm still a small church Presbyterian with an insatiable curiosity for this strange and unusual faith we call Christianity. My faith has taught me well, and when it's at its very best, it has pushed past all its own limitations. May you find strength and courage to stay with Jesus on the stranger twists and turns he takes! I find it well worth the ride. Amen.