

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Year B, Proper 15
August 16, 2009
John 6: 51-58

In the name of One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"It sounds so much like cannibalism."

This is what someone said to me this week as she explained to me her difficulty with this reading.

The Gospel says, *'Unless you eat of the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you.'* I too believe, if taken out of context, that this text can sound pretty creepy. I mean we are talking today about eating flesh and drinking blood.

But context is everything. And right now we are not curled up on our couches watching Twilight, the popular vampire movie just released on DVD this weekend.

We are in a church, worshipping God and celebrating the Holy Eucharist.

In a few minutes most of you will come to the Table and receive a piece of bread and take a sip of wine. And as you do every Sunday, you will hear the words: The Body of Christ; the Bread of Heaven. The Blood of Christ; the Cup of Salvation.

These are familiar words. You all never seem shocked by them. In fact, when distributing communion, I have yet to see anyone squirm.

Maybe you don't squirm because I don't say, *the Flesh of Christ*. Or maybe, because the language is so familiar, it has lost some of its impact?

I think repetition and familiarity often lessen the potential impact of what we say and do in church.

I know it happens when we baptize someone: How many of you when the priest holds the precious baby over the font think to yourselves: "Here is the moment when that baby dies!" (Of course, it is hard to make this association when, in many Episcopal Churches today, the priest barely wets the forehead of the one being baptized.)

However, we are saying metaphorically that this baby - or whoever is being baptized - is drowning in the waters of baptism, dying with Christ, only to be raised to new life in Him.

Flannery O'Connor's takes on the graphic imagery of the relationship between death and baptism in her story *The River*. In this story a child drowns trying to baptize himself in a river. Following the story's publication, O'Connor was criticized for being too extreme, too graphic, too shocking.

Her response to her critics is said to have been: *"In the land of the nearly blind, you need to draw really big caricatures"* (see Scott Hoezee: <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>).

I think this is what Jesus is doing in today's reading. In the land of the nearly blind, he is talking as graphically as he can.

And so, we continue down the metaphorical road David first preached about a few weeks ago.

"People employ metaphors to invite listeners to imagine," David said, "and to propose new ways of seeing things—ways that stretch and challenge us. Ways that even threaten us. Ways of seeing that spell the difference between death and life."

This is the fourth Sunday in a row, and we have one more on the way, when we listen to passages from the sixth chapter of John. The entire chapter is about Jesus being the Bread of Life. The entire chapter is about Metaphor. The entire chapter is about life and death.

Five weeks we hear about the bread of life; it is as if the lectionary folks believe we need as much help in understanding what Jesus says as his audience did 2000 years ago.

But will repetition and familiarity help us get the message? Or will it numb us to its true meaning?

I don't believe Jesus will allow the latter.

'Unless you eat of the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you.'

We hear Jesus say these words and we, like his original audience, are shocked. Jesus is talking about his flesh. The Gospel writer is being quite vivid in his imagery.

John, or whoever is writing this Gospel, does not use the term "body" as most New Testament writers do. He uses the same word in Greek – *sarx* – with which he begins his account of the Good News: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The Gospel writer has constructed his narrative intentionally from the very opening lines of the text. For him, the use of the word *flesh* is important and intentional.

But we already heard Jesus use the word *flesh* at the end of the passage last week.

What is new for this week? Why is this text so shocking?

Jesus goes on. And it is as if Jesus is hitting his audience over the head. You will not only "eat" my flesh, he says, but you will crunch on it - or - chew it with your mouth opened. The gospel writer again switches verbs, no longer using the usual term for eating, but instead this more graphic term.

It is as if the writer wants us to know how shocking Jesus is being. He is, in effect, grossing out his audience.

But, *"In the land of the nearly blind, you need to draw really big caricatures."*

The people have not been getting what Jesus is saying.

They don't understand what he means when he says he is the bread of life. What he means when he says that the bread he gives for the life of the world is his flesh. What he means when he says that they have to eat his flesh to have a share in this life.

The audience doesn't get it. And so Jesus invites them to try harder. To take the dilemma and sink their teeth into it – so to speak.

Ahhhh...metaphor. We are back here again.

"Metaphors introduce a certain tension," writes an author examining the relationship between violence, hospitality and the cross. "They don't just open up the meaning of something by associating it with something else, but in the process they also limit and circumscribe. Sallie McFague, refers to this limiting characteristic of metaphors when she says that they "always contain the whisper, 'it is... *and it is not*' (Hans Boersma in *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, p 101)."

So we are left this morning trying to figure what is...and what is not. What is Jesus saying and what is Jesus not saying with the words: *'Unless you eat of the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you.'*

I can assure you that we are NOT talking about cannibalism this morning. We are not about destroying anything today. This morning, we are about sharing in Jesus Christ. Partaking in Jesus Christ and the life he offers. We are about sharing - partaking - in the Kingdom of God.

The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

Through the incarnation, the eternal word becomes *flesh*. Really real. Just like us. Jesus Christ, God incarnate in full humanity, participates fully in our fleshy, bloody human lives.

God participates fully in every part of our life – in our joy and in the gut wrenching pain and in the spilled blood; when sit and share a meal with our family and friends and when we are excluded from the Table. God has been there.

And God remains.

There is certainly enough blood, guts, flesh and gore in our world today. Images of these things are not often pleasant. So, to hear flesh and blood spoken about in church is shocking.

But the message here is that God lives this life with us. And we are invited to live with God, to have life with God, to abide in God, and to have God's life in us.

Our host at the Table, in fact, insists on this.

'Unless you eat of the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you.'

God's insistence is for our benefit and the benefit of the whole world.

"Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us," writes Miroslav Volf, a theologian at Yale who writes about war, violence, God and Reconciliation.

What happens to us must be done by us. We can receive grace but only if we do not resist being agents of grace. There is an Insistence in God's grace....*Unless....you will have no...*

Volf continues, "Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in – even our enemies. This is what we enact as we celebrate the Eucharist. In receiving Christ's [flesh] and spilled blood, we, in a sense, receive all those whom Christ received by suffering (Exclusion and Embrace p 129)."

"In the land of the nearly blind, you need to draw really big caricatures"

Jesus wants us to share as closely and as intimately as we can in the life he offers. He wants us to share this life with others. To invite others into the life he offers. To bring them to the Table. Here at church. Or in your homes around your dinner table. In the streets as you pass a homeless man or woman. In a restaurant with your friends.

To be in communion - full community with others – we must partake of Jesus Christ – take a part of him – just as he has taken a part of us, just as he has partaken in our lives. Just as he has, in his flesh, suffered with all of us and taken our suffering into himself.

We ARE to eat his flesh, consume this reality. And leave this place to serve the hungry world.

Other's hunger is now a part of us - we have taken other's suffering into ourselves this morning.

But at this table, our host offers us the food *and the grace* to meet this suffering of the world. Amen.