

22 August 2021—The 12th Sunday after Pentecost: John 6:56-69 (Year B, Proper 16)

Today we look at the Gospel, the last 14 verses of John 6. As in the last several weeks, I urge you to read John Chapter 6 this week. It is important to remember that the Gospel-writers were storytellers, and very good ones at that. How interesting that the first Christian writings were letters written in response to immediate issues, and the second oldest writings are stories about Jesus (i.e., the Gospels). Since the Gospels come first, and tell us about Jesus, we might naturally think they came first. Not so. Both the New Testament letters and the Gospels present theological understandings of Jesus, and yet they are not theology in the sense of propositions and proofs. The reality and power of Jesus is found in the ebb and flow of human struggle, in the middle of human life.

Chapter six is a turning point. The chapter begins with the feeding of the 5000, who are so impressed they want to proclaim Jesus, king! Then everything unravels. By chapter's end what had been 5000 followers is only 12. This mass defection is not because of what Jesus *does*, but what he says about himself. Who Jesus *is* offends, and not just long ago.

Verse 60: *When many of his disciples heard it they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' The 'it' is this: ...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life within you.* Jesus describes his body and blood as *true food...true drink*; Jesus likens his body and blood to the manna in the wilderness which *came down from heaven* but contrasts himself with the desert manna in that nourishment was physical. Those who eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ will live forever.

Jesus scandalizes—it is not merely the grotesque imagery, not just that the Torah forbade consuming blood. Jesus is clearly saying he is not merely the human agent for God's miracle (as was Moses), he *is* the miracle. This is the crowd's outrage: they are entertained when Jesus gets the better of his opponents, and they certainly want free food, but they do not want to grapple with who Jesus is. To believe in the reality to which these symbols point will always be a scandal: *...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life within you.* We are to be nurtured by Jesus, through his Word and Sacraments, nourished with Him in our daily lives, his Wisdom enlightening us through the Father's love and the Spirit's power. We are to consume him that we may be consumed by him: he in us and we in him, even as Jesus is in the Father and the Father in Jesus (cf. John 17:20-26).

Yet unlike the consumption of earthly food, we do not eat of Jesus to be sated but that we may hunger more; that we, as he himself, hunger for the world's salvation. I imagine his heart broke when he saw the crowds abandoning him in disgust, and perhaps with tears asked the Twelve: *Do you also wish to go away?* With joy he heard Peter's reply: *Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life...you are the Holy One of God.* Jesus is the one who gives eternal life because he is eternal life; to eat of him is to receive eternal life and become carriers of Jesus' eternal life into the world.

The crowds wanted a Messiah to make all things right. Jesus wants us to make all things right with him. We are to, living for and in Jesus, feed the hungry, insist on justice and peace for all, befriend the lonely, oppressed and pain-filled, resist violence and exploitation, protect the helpless and powerless, offer healing to those with broken hearts, broken minds and broken bodies; we are to love sinners (including ourselves) into wholeness, to cherish human life, to ceaselessly contend that every human being regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or moral failure is a child of God, that no one is irredeemable, no sin is beyond redemption, that every person from conception to the last breath of mortal life is a unique, irreplaceable, wondrous miracle of God born in mortality, made for eternity.

The Table of the Altar will soon be ready, and you are invited. Come and leave with him all that burdens you; he will take it from you with joy if you but give it to him. Come and be changed because it is Jesus who feeds you. He loves you as you are and loves you too much for you to remain as you are. You are invited. Come, eat, receive eternal life. Amen.