

Jesus is the Living Bread of Life.

John 6:51-58

The Gospel of John continues our discussion of Jesus and the metaphor of Jesus being the bread of life. Repetition is an important part of the way John tells the story of Jesus' ministry. And John wants to make sure that we get this whole metaphor about bread very clearly in our souls. Chapter 6 of John is a long dialogue of Jesus reflecting on the miracle of feeding 5000. And each time Jesus speaks about the bread, he uses deeper and deeper metaphors about eating the bread. Until finally, in our verses today, Jesus says he is the living bread from heaven, and commands his followers to eat the bread of heaven, which he calls his flesh.

So, you need to know that this scripture for today is usually avoided by protestant pastors because this metaphor could be confusing, is a little bit frightening, and really hard to preach about. Imagining eating Jesus' flesh makes everybody uncomfortable—the people around Jesus yelled, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Well, that is a good question. Let's see if we can answer it, with help from the Holy Spirit. Let us pray: e pule kākou: "Dear God, how is Jesus the bread of heaven, and how are we to eat Jesus' flesh? Help us understand this symbol, O Lord. Amen."

The Gospel of John approaches the story of Jesus differently than the three other biblical Gospel stories. Matthew, Mark and Luke all see the Jesus story much the same. They are called the Synoptic Gospels, which is the Greek word for "Seeing the same." They are set in one calendar year. They each relate many miracles. The Synoptics all have Jesus introducing the Lord's Table in the Upper room on Maundy Thursday. They were written between 25-50 years after Jesus was crucified. They are all mostly set in and around Jerusalem and Galilee. The Gospel of John departs from many of these conventions. It was written 100 years after Jesus died. In John there are only four miracles. Each miracle is followed by a long discourse of Jesus explaining the miracle. John does not set the first Communion on Maundy Thursday, he actually does not mention Communion at all, except by inference in passages like ours today. The Gospel of John is set over **three** years and **three** Passover Feasts, not one year. John sees the crucifixion of Jesus as the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb, so John moved the time of his story to Passover to match that metaphor. The Synoptic Gospels place the crucifixion before the Passover Feast. John was more interested in presenting Jesus as the Passover Lamb, so he did not include the Lord's Table in Holy Week, but, instead placed it here, in the sixth chapter, after the Feeding of the 5000.

John loved spiritual metaphors and symbolic language. In John, Jesus makes eight "**I am**" statements. None of these are meant to be factual, all of them are spiritual metaphors. Jesus says **I am** the bread of life and **I am** the light of the world. Jesus says, Before Abraham was, **I am**; **I am** the gate; Jesus says **I am** the good shepherd; **I am** the resurrection and the life; **I am** the way, the truth and the life; and **I am** the true vine. The bread metaphor is the first **I am** metaphor in John, and in ancient story-telling, the first symbol used is the central metaphor of the story.

So now Jesus expands the bread metaphor by inviting us to not passively watch, but to actively LIVE this metaphor with Jesus. Jesus asks us to actively **eat** the metaphorical bread, to take an active role in doing something symbolic with the

bread of heaven that has come into our lives. In our passage, Jesus commands us to equate the bread of life to Jesus' body, and then to eat it.

As Jesus has been talking story about being the bread of life, he has talked about the symbol of bread from several different angles. Finally, in today's passage, Jesus confronts us and asks us to take this metaphor very **personally**. We can't just sit and watch as Jesus talks about the bread—we must personally get involved with Jesus—in other words, we must symbolically consume him. Why do we need to consume Jesus? So that Jesus, as the bread of life, gets into us, is digested by us, becomes spiritual nourishment for us, filling our very arteries with this spiritual food of Jesus. Then the nourishment of Jesus reaches deep into every cell of our body, feeding our every word and action and dream. This is not a passive metaphor where we can just sit back and watch. We must actively engage, or as John says, we must eat the bread of life in Jesus.

Now if we think this causes **us** to be uncomfortable in our modern times, ancient Jews were horrified by these metaphors. Eating human flesh and drinking blood were strictly forbidden by the Jewish law, so what Jesus says here is shocking and an abomination to Jews. We know Jesus was a Jew and he never humanly broke a Jewish law, so Jesus is not asking people to literally eat his flesh and drink his blood, because that would break the Jewish law. The characters in the Gospel of John kept misunderstanding Jesus' metaphors by taking them literally; we must not make the same mistake. Jesus did not intend the woman at the well to interpret his metaphor of living water literally. Jesus did not intend Nicodemus to go back into the womb when he asked him to be reborn. Jesus did not want people to envision him as a swinging pasture gate when he said he was a door, or to imagine him sheering smelly sheep as a shepherd.

Jesus spoke this way to challenge us to actively place **ourselves** into these commandments, to actively challenge us to **participate** in eating and drinking as ways of fully partaking of Jesus and actively abiding in Jesus. So how are we abide in Jesus using eating and drinking as symbols and metaphors?

When we abide or live in someone, we participate in **everything** in their life. They participate in our lives; we are joined together. With Jesus, we are joined as children of God, but we are also joined with Jesus as the author and perfecter of our faith. We follow Jesus, that is, we pattern our lives after him. We **abide** in Jesus daily as Jesus saves us from our brokenness. Jesus saves us in love. We live in Jesus, we gain our living life-force through Jesus. We consume Jesus, so now the very grace and goodness of Jesus runs through **our** blood. Eating and drinking Jesus is a symbol helping us to understand that **we are what we eat**, and in Jesus, we eat the perfect meal and drink the holy water, becoming people of hope, salvation and eternal love.

Jesus is never literally a door or a shepherd, or bread, or a vine or light. But Jesus is certainly symbolically all these things as we try to use human words to describe our indescribable God. Jesus is the eternal God who has come down to us on this earth. In Jesus, God dares to be flesh like us. In Jesus we can see and experience God, or, in other words, we can eat and drink the un-seeable God appearing on earth in the seeable body of Jesus.

For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Whoever goes to Jesus will never be spiritually hungry, and whoever trusts in Jesus will never be spiritually thirsty. This is the spiritual bread come down from heaven, not like the manna bread that your ancestors ate and still died. But all of us, who take our spiritual nourishment from Jesus, will live forever. Amen.