

Pentecost 12b, August 15, 2021

John 6:51-58

LFLC

John 6:51: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

First off, as graphic as this verse is. . .and the description in it is. . .
it is NOT to be taken literally. This is a good example
of what we call “metaphorical” language.

Now, just to clarify something you probably already know:
If a sentence comparing things uses the words “like” or “as”,
then the comparison in it is called a “simile”.
“Her tears were like a river running down her cheeks”. . .
or “he felt as if he was drowning in debt.”

It is not that her tears were or are actually a river but they are “like” a river.
He isn’t really drowning, but is so deep in debt, he feels LIKE it. . .
or “AS IF” he is underwater and can’t breathe.
So a simile compares things explicitly, pointedly, specifically.
“This is LIKE that”.

A metaphor, on the other hand, not only compares things
without using the prepositions “like” or “as”
but also expands the comparison by giving a different
or deeper insight into the comparison.

For example, the simile “Life is LIKE a journey”
is a rather straightforward comparison.
We can imagine it as such with birth as the start of the journey,
death as the final destination, and various events
and experiences along the way.

But to say, metaphorically, that “Life IS a journey”
creates a different sort of comparison by opening up
a whole new way of viewing life itself—such as, life being more
than simply one year or one experience after the other.
“Life IS a journey” is more about the growth, learning and insight
gained along the way and how those changes have shaped
both the journey and the traveller.

Now, let me expand on this whole idea just a bit
by looking at this passage from John 6.
In it, Jesus is talking about “life”—but not just life and living
as breathing, moving, eating, drinking, speaking—
all the outward signs that appear to define us as “alive”.

Instead, he is opening up the concept of “life”
to the idea of “real life”—that is, life inside us or within us
where life really counts, where it really matters,
where real life is truly defined.

He then goes on to say that, without him in our lives, we are not really “alive”. . .
and the only way we can be really alive, he says, is if he lives in us. . .
and the way he says he gets inside us. . . or comes to life inside us. . .
and is made a part of us. . . and we are made a part of him. . .
is if we “eat his flesh and drink his blood”.

Obviously, given its graphic, even disturbing expression,
that particular metaphor requires additional background or context—
and it is found in the idea that “No blood means no life”.

Now, that idea isn’t just something that ancient Jewish people believed.
It is actually true--medically, scientifically--and we know it to be true:
“No blood; no life”.

Thus, if we are in danger of dying because of blood loss—
where we are “bleeding to death”--what we need is a “transfusion”—
a medical procedure in which the blood. . . or life. . .
of someone else is “taken” from them
and “put/injected/transfused” into us.
Their blood, their life, becomes our blood and our life.
We now live because a part of them lives in us.

However, while most people, with some exceptions, have no problem
with giving or receiving a blood transfusion,
if we had to drink it, that might be a different story—
a definite stumbling block for sure.
At the same time, I suppose if it was presented to us
as absolutely necessary to our survival,
we would find a way to do even that while holding our noses.

In the same vein (pun intended), it is interesting to me
that we quite easily offer people “flesh” when it comes to eating meat—
beef or pork--but we always couch or cloak it in language
that is not exactly realistic or specific.

For instance, we ask people if they would some bacon,
or pork loin or a pork chop, but we never ask them
if they would like some “pig” or “pig flesh”.
Or we offer a sirloin steak or beef roast or BBQ’d ribs,
but we don’t call the choices “cow” or “cow flesh”.

And why is that? Well, I'm not sure, but I suspect that any restaurant
 which had ANIMAL FLESH. . . or PIG or PIG PARTS
 or COW or COW PARTS on the menu would likely not draw
 big crowds of hungry diners—corona restrictions or not!

In other words, we use language to describe or disguise certain things. . .
 to “emphasize” or “de-emphasize” certain things.

And I mention those functions of language, particularly,
 because John's Gospel, written at the end of the First century, is directed,
 at least in large part, against several heresies or false teachings
 about Jesus the Christ that were prominent in his day,
 and one of the most dominant of those heresies was “Docetism”. . .
 which comes from a Greek word meaning “to appear to be or seem to be”.

Docetists believed and taught that, yes, Jesus was divine,
 but that he only “seemed” to be human.

He “appeared” to be a real human being—that is,
 had all the necessary attributes of humans—
 because he had “borrowed” or “put on” or “disguised himself”
 in, with, and as a human body.

Now, one of the most serious implications of this heresy was that
 if, or more accurately for them, **since** Jesus was only “divine”,
 he couldn't REALLY have died on the cross,
 because only humans can die.

So it was his “borrowed” human body which died on the cross
 while the “divine” person he truly was inside that “shell”
 had already left that body. . .and so never died. . .couldn't die.

In countering that heresy, the writer of John 6 is making sure
 that his readers know that Jesus was “really” human—
 a man of flesh and blood—that he didn't and wasn't
 a “pretend” human being but had “a real body—
 a body of flesh: skin, bones, tissue, muscle, ligaments, a heart—
 and so had, and shed, “real blood” when he “really” died on the cross
 and gave his “real”, complete, and total self for the life of the world

John also did something else that is helpful for us to know about this passage--
 and it is that the Greek verb John uses for “eat”
 isn't the word normally used to” EAT something.
 Instead, he verb he uses is the one which translates literally
 as “chew” or “chomp” or “bite”, even “devour”—
 all graphic terms meant to drive home the point to the Docetists
 that this Jesus is not only divine, but a “real flesh-and-blood” human being.

And it is important for us to remember that this “flesh-and-blood imagery”
 comes from the same John who introduces his gospel with the phrase:
 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God
 and the Word was God”. . .and then, shortly thereafter,
 follows up with: “And the Word became flesh”.

Notice, he doesn’t say that Word took on or put on or became a “body”
 but that the Word “put on ‘meat’. . .put on “flesh”—
 the same “flesh” that he calls us to eat and take into ourselves.

And so when Jesus says “eat my flesh” and “drink my blood”,
 it is his way of saying “When my body becomes a part of your body. . .
 when my flesh knits together with your flesh. . .
 and when my blood pumps through your heart
 and flows through your veins. . .then I become, and am, a part of you
 and you become, and are, a part of me; I live in you and you live in me.
 We are one with each other for now and for always.”

And that “flesh and blood” connection is critical for us to remember. . .
 while that very word and very concept of “remember”
 brings me to the core or heart of this sermon.

In a book written by an Indigenous woman, scholar and professor in the US,
 a book entitled “Braiding Sweetgrass”—the author makes a number
 of very insightful and striking points or comparisons,
 and of the two notable phrases I will highlight today,
 this is the first one: “Ceremonies help us ‘remember to remember’.”

Now, if I understand her correctly, she is telling us that in indigenous traditions,
 stories are told of and about and from the ancestors
 who are always present among the living. . .and live on
 among the living by virtue of the retelling of those stories.

Just a little sidenote here: To me, whether indigenous or not,
 it is helpful for us “to remember” that we do not exist on our own
 or live by ourselves, but are always, as the Book of Hebrews puts it,
 “surrounded by a cloud of witnesses”. So we are never alone,
 even when that may seem to be our reality.

And the Hebrew Scriptures are filled with language reminiscent of this concept.
 When Abraham or Isaac or Jacob or David die, we are told
 “that they were gathered to their ancestors.”

In somewhat the same way, the author of “Braiding Sweetgrass” says that,
 in ceremonies and rituals which “remember” our ancestors, we join them—

not in the sense of waiting to meeting them again
 somewhere in another dimension after death—but rather,
 we join the circle of our ancestors in the here and now
 and, therefore, surround, support and guide those still living.

And she goes on to say that “ceremonies help us ‘remember to remember’”--
 and it is this concept or “metaphor” of “remembering”

I want to explore just a bit by “reminding” us that “remembering”
 is not simply a function of neurons in the part of the brain
 where our memories are stored.

Instead, that very “remembering” has more profound dimension to it.

For example, we know that to “dis-member” someone is to cut off or remove
 a “member” of their body—an arm, a leg, a head.

Indeed, a dis-membered body is often used to describe a grisly crime scene.

But if to “dis-member” is to “remove a member of the body”,
 then we could say that to “re-member” is to re-attach or re-connect a member.

Thus, someone who has lost a hand or arm or leg in an accident
 and the surgeon re-attaches it, there is actually a “re-membering” happening.

Therefore, when we “remember” what Jesus did on the night of his betrayal
 and his subsequent death and resurrection. . .when we “remember” him,
 we also and truly “re-member” him: We. . . and he. . .
 are re-attached, re-connected, re-remembered to one another.”
 Chew on that for a moment!

A second phrase that the author uses to describe our intimate relationships
 with those from our past, present and future is this:

“Ceremony is a vehicle for belonging” by “marrying the mundane to the sacred.”

Once again if I understand her correctly, she is helping us

“remember to remember” that “ceremonies”

or, in language more familiar to us, “rituals”—

rituals like the sacraments are the means or vehicles

that we use to remember that we belong to one another. . .

a belonging which takes place in and through rituals that

“marry the mundane—the ordinary—to the sacred—the extra-ordinary.”

Now, the reason I mention these last two particular sentiments

is because John Chapter 6 is all about the eucharist—

the meal of thanksgiving, the Lord’s Supper, the Holy Communion—the meal to

which everyone is welcome and at which everyone belongs—

where everyone, to coin a metaphor, “has a place at the table”.

In the common, ordinary, mundane elements like bread made from grain,
 mixed with a little salt and water and then kneaded and baked. . .
 or, in our case these days—in little round weeny wafers,
 pressed flat and mass produced—and in the fruit of the vine,
 whether red or white wine or grape juice—
 in such easily overlooked and mundane elements,
 this meal connects us to the sacred. . .the holy.

And it is holy because the one whose life is in it
 and who gives his life to us through it—it is holy because he is holy—
 which means that when he and his life joins us,
 enters us, fills us, enlivens, we, too, become holy—
 a holy community. . .a “holy communion”.

And it is really, really important for us to remember that. . .
 “to remember. . .to remember that.”.

In this simple eating and drinking, we are transported back in time
 to an upper room on the night he was betrayed.
 As well, in another and very real way, he and that upper room
 come forward in time to be here, in this place, at this moment.
 An as he did then, so he comes among us now to preside at the table—
 to take, bless and break and share the bread of life and the cup of salvation with us.

And this “eucharistic journey” doesn’t end there either,
 because in and by our participation in this meal,
 we are carried forward into the future--
 which now blends with the past and the present—
 and in this moment of blending. . .this moment of eternity,
 we are gathered and joined to all who have been, are,
 and ever will be in and with the living Christ.

And this whole mystery happens among us, with us, within us, and to us
 in this ordinary little place, on this very ordinary day,
 to us who are ordinary human beings filled with
 an extraordinary loving and living and giving Christ.

So each and every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper,
 God comes to us once again to offer us a promise—
 a promise made so firm and so solid
 that we can touch and hold it, taste it and eat it."

Truly, the Eucharist is life-giving
 because it is Jesus who gives it. . .and it is life-giving
 because it is Jesus himself who is given.

Someone once said to me at the door where I was greeting people after worship:

“Hergy, I appreciate your sermons. They speak to my life.
 But, to be honest, for me, they are kind of up and down,
 some good ones and some not so good ones.
 But I have found that Holy Communion
 is the one constant in my spiritual journey.
 Forgiveness. Life. Eternal life.
 That is what I receive when I come to the table.”

For us who share in this meal, the connection is inescapable:

As we eat and drink, we participate in the promise
 Jesus fulfilled on the cross—the promise
 of forgiveness, life and salvation, as Luther puts it--
 and “salvation,” from the Latin “*salve*”, means “healing.”
 So, forgiveness and life, healing and wholeness:
 Crunching it all with our teeth.

In a few minutes when the invitation to come to the table is spoken—
 not just tossed out generally or casually but addressed specifically
 to you. . .to us. . .to all who are present—
 let us remember to remember that, in and through this mundane ritual,
 we are connected to the sacred. . .and, filled with and by the living Christ,
 we can rejoice in the assurance that we belong—
 the truth that we belong to him now and will belong to him forever.

Now, chew on that this week.

Amen. SDG