

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

When my children were growing up, I had a sign on my refrigerator that said: "I know you think you understand what you thought I said, but what you may not realize is, what you heard is not what I meant!" Communication, under the best of circumstances is hard. Misunderstandings come so easily. It sometimes takes time and effort to convey what's on our minds. It's tough to make it come out so that what you heard is the same as what I meant.

Our Gospel lesson this morning is just such an example. What we 'hear' in Jesus' words may, in fact, not be what he meant. And what we heard is very hard to hear. Most of my clergy colleagues routinely duck this passage when it routinely appears in the Lectionary. I plead guilty to that myself. This is not only a difficult passage to preach; it is also a difficult passage to read aloud. And if the preacher isn't really careful in interpreting the word in the sermon, it's very easy to drift off into blatant heresy. But for whatever reason, this year I felt drawn to this passage rather than repelled by it.

The biggest temptation here is to try to explain the Holy Eucharist and that was my initial reaction to Jesus' words. Surely this command to his disciples is the basis for the Holy Eucharist which is central to our faith and to our worship. It seems important to understand what this sacrament really means and what it really does...to us and for us. But as I read this passage over and over again, my first reaction was always the same...

I am NOT a cannibal!

Jesus says to us: "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."

Oh, dear. Sounds like cannibalism to me.

And Jesus doesn't just say it once. He says it repeatedly...in several different ways...not unlike the way I used to lecture my children by saying the same thing in as many different ways as I could think of in the hopes that they would not only hear me, but they would understand what I was saying. The repetition was my way of letting them know that what I had to say was important, so they should listen!!

Jesus treats us like the children we are. He says it again: "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."

And then again: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”

And just in case we didn’t get it, which we actually don’t, he says it one more time. And in this statement, the translation of the Greek used for this statement is not just to “eat;” the verb is more accurately translated as “chew” or “gnaw.” Now Jesus has upped the ante. As if it were possible, this last statement is even more repugnant: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

Oh, please! The early Christians were persecuted by the Romans not only for disrupting the social order of their day by claiming that Jesus was the Son of God rather than Caesar and putting masters and slaves on equal footing, but because the Romans saw them as a barbaric and dangerous cult that practiced cannibalism!

Well, I am *not* a cannibal and neither are you or any of the other Christians who regularly participate in Holy Eucharist. So what did Jesus mean by these words? And what is it that we are actually doing during Holy Eucharist?

Answering these questions sent me scurrying back to my theology textbooks from seminary. I went back and read Thomas Aquinas. I went over the explanations of the Eucharist by Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. I read again about transubstantiation and consubstantiation and Memorial and Real Presence. And I came to one inescapable conclusion: no human being or collection of human beings, regardless of how devout they are or how brilliant they are, will ever be able to adequately unravel and explain this magnificent mystery. It also occurred to me that Jesus never does and never will command of us anything as repugnant as what we think he just said.

So what did he mean?

Remember, we are reading from the Gospel of John. It is the one Gospel that is significantly different from the other three in its emphasis on Jesus’ divinity rather than his humanity. It begins by saying: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is the Incarnation of God.

The Gospel of Matthew gives us details about the temptation of Jesus after his baptism...and after he was identified by God as God’s Son, the beloved. The first temptation was around bread. The devil tempted Jesus to turn the stones into bread so that Jesus might eat. But Jesus declined and replied to Satan: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Can we connect some dots here? Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God. We've already been advised by Jesus that we are to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

As we approach this scripture passage from the Gospel of John, remember the incarnational nature of Jesus. He is God incarnate. He is God in human form. This human form that Jesus inhabits while he walks the earth will be given up...his human body will be broken for us. His human blood is the blood of a new covenant between human beings and God.

Perhaps Jesus' literal words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood have some connection to his incarnational nature. He is the Word that comes from the mouth of God. He is the bread that gives us everlasting life. He is the source of all life. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

He loves us passionately...and all-consumingly...and desperately. If you have ever loved anyone, you can imagine what God's love is like...just multiply what you feel by a couple of million times. That's God's love for us. When you love someone, you want to be as physically close to them as you can. God wants more than that. God doesn't just want us to be close to Him. Through his Son, Jesus, God wants us to ingest him...to take him inside our minds, our souls and our bodies. God wants to give us life beyond this life...life that lasts forever. He wants to abide inside us. He wants his life force, his blood, to be coursing through our veins. And he wants us to abide in Him in our experience of the Eucharist shared with every other soul that loves and seeks Him, believes in Him and wants to abide in Him.

Through the millenia of the last 2000 years, brilliant theologians have theorized about how all of this works. Their theories are devised to help us understand how Jesus is present in the bread and the wine. The truth is...there is no way to know *how* Jesus is present in the bread and the wine. We know simply that he is. And the reason we know is because Jesus himself told us when he held up the bread and said to his disciples, "This is my body which is given for you." And he held the chalice of wine and said to them, "This is my blood of the new covenant." That's the beautiful thing about the mystery of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We don't need to be able to figure out how it is done in order to believe that it is done at every celebration of the Holy Eucharist. And to know that we are fed and strengthened by it.

We know that Jesus is present in the bread and the wine because he told us exactly what he wanted us to do and he told us that he would be present. Jesus never told us something that wasn't true and Jesus always keeps his promises. We don't have to figure it out! It's a beautiful mystery.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.