

The 13th Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 16 – Year B
22 August 2021
St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos
Berkeley D. Johnson, III

Good morning!

We find ourselves, once again, and for the third week in a row, in the 6th chapter of the Gospel According to John, where Jesus speaks of himself as the Bread of Life, or the Bread from Heaven. Someone – and it's not just the lectionary redactors - is trying to send us a message, so let's take one more look at it before we head back into Mark next Sunday.

Because chapter 6 is where John's eucharistic theology is located. Remember there is no institution of the sacrament of bread and wine on the last night in John; rather, Jesus washes the disciples' feet. But John's eucharistic theology and understanding goes way beyond anything located in any of the other gospels.

A number of words and phrases caught my attention as I studied this passage; so, following our Lectio Divina format, where we listen for a word or phrase that stands out for us, I'll start with some of the initial ones that jumped out at me, and then we will move to the bigger, weightier ones toward the end.

The first phrase that caught my attention, which I evidently had never noticed before, is where it says that Jesus said these *things while teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum*. So let's try and imagine that!: We're following Jesus; we've gathered for worship; we have a sacred tradition, one that's been handed down from generation to generation, over hundreds and hundreds of

years; and this is the message he delivers? “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Let’s try and absorb, for a moment, the magnitude of that statement.

Another phrase that jumped out at me in the first paragraph is where Jesus says “just as *the living* Father sent me...”; because, as you just heard, that’s the prayer I pray before my sermons – “In the name of the holy, living, and undivided Trinity.” And we just prayed to the living God to begin our worship this morning. So, our God is a living God.

Then there were verses that stood out, or were difficult for me, for other reasons, such as, “It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.” Now, we tend to have a very Incarnational theology here in The Episcopal Church – matter *matters*, Jesus had a body, Jesus takes the time to heal and restore people and bodies throughout the Gospels – so what do we do with this passage?

Well, in my online research earlier this week, I found this snippet. The link to the essay was no longer active, but the header was still visible, and it said this: “It is through our bodies that we encounter God’s creation; it is with our bodies that we can strive for justice.”¹ [repeat for emphasis]

Indeed, our bodies are the vehicles through which we are able to have our earthly journey – to love and enact justice. Especially in my hospice work, I am constantly affirming the sacredness of our bodies and our earthly journey.

And so, having re-equipped myself with this deeper, more nuanced understanding, I looked at the passage again, and saw “the flesh is useless” slightly differently this time; more like the idea or

¹ *Fleshly Life*, Nanette Sawyer, *The Hardest Question*, 2012

notion that “I made it on my own” without any help from God, or without an acknowledgment that it is, in fact, *the Spirit* who makes all things possible.

And I imagine, if you’ve come here this morning, or if you’re out there watching along with us, that there’s a good chance you’ve given up on, or dismissed entirely, the idea or notion that you’ve accomplished, or achieved everything (or anything, for that matter) on your own, without God’s help. So, rather than interpreting this in some sort of dualistic, bodily-negating sense, I think Jesus’ message here is probably more along the lines of telling them, and us, that “flesh alone isn’t going to get it done.”

Another verse that was difficult for me (I told you there were a bunch of them) is where Jesus says “no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” Uh oh, what do we do with that?

And there I was, on Wednesday, sitting at my kitchen table, thinking about having to preach on this – I mean, you know I could just ignore it, right? – but those of you who know me know that’s probably not going to be an option.

And I thought to myself, why not just ask for it to be granted? And so I did: I literally sat there, and said a prayer, asking the Father to grant that I might abide in the Son, and that the Son might abide in me. I know I’ve prayed a lot of prayers over the years, but I don’t know that I’ve ever specifically prayed that prayer before, so I did. What else *can* we do, besides ask God to grant that we might abide in the Son, and the Son in us?

But when we pray that prayer, there is a cost, isn’t there? The cost of...[motion to the congregation] discipleship. Yes, the cost of discipleship; because it’s not only a prayer for comfort, is it? It’s a prayer for strength as well. Like the beautiful phrase in Eucharistic Prayer C:

“Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.”

It’s not only about solace and comfort, is it? Indeed not; this teaching is difficult; for next we hear that “Because of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So, Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you *also* wish to go away?’”

And “Simon Peter [...it’s always Simon Peter, isn’t it?] answered him, ‘Lord, to whom *can* we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.’”

And I love that image of Christ standing right here, in our midst, looking at us, and asking, “Do you also want to leave?” And it’s like, “where’re we gonna go?” No, we’re here, right?

And it really struck me that this passage is John’s version of Peter’s famous confession in the synoptic Gospels, when Jesus asks, “But who do you say that I am?”, so I checked the Anchor Bible commentary yesterday, and it appears Raymond Brown felt so as well.

But all of this is just a preface, a preamble, for the *word* I want to focus on, which is *abide*.

So let’s look again at that very first sentence and shift our focus: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide* in me, and I in them.”

And I thought to myself, where else do I remember “abide” from in John?...and of course it’s from chapter 15 of the farewell discourse on the last night in the upper room in John, when Jesus says “Abide in me, as I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches...abide in my

love”. So, we have Jesus as the living bread that has come down from heaven, and Jesus as the vine which bears the fruit that make the wine.

All week, as I was thinking about this sermon, I found myself thinking about abiding in Christ; and as I said, I’ve been praying and asking the Father that I might abide in Christ, and that Christ might abide in me, knowing that it means more than just seeking rest or refuge. So I looked it up to learn more about its usage. The Greek word for abide is Meno, [M-E-N-O], and I came across this meditation on what it means to abide.

“There’s a subtle flavor that using ‘abide’ gives us. Abide means not just to continue to exist, but to continue to exist under adversity, clinging to hope, clinging to life, continuing on as things are, not knowing when, or even if, they will ever change, but not letting difficult circumstances change or touch us. A person who is shipwrecked, being battered by constant storms, head down, huddled on a small spit of rock, uncertain of rescue, physically endangered, but with an internal peace – that one is abiding.”²

And I think of the people of Haiti, battered by storms after the earthquake, and people facing persecution in various countries, especially right now in Afghanistan, where there is political and societal upheaval and unrest, and then I thought of the people, right here in our own parish and community, those for whom we will be praying in a few moments, who are facing life-threatening illness and dire circumstances...and I thought...isn’t that what we are *all* doing, to one extent or another? Abiding? Seeking to abide, in Christ? Staring down whatever it is that we are facing, but not letting it affect us internally? Isn’t that, in fact, how we come to believe

² Blogos.org; The Greek Geek, S. Edgar 8-20-13 (text inclusivised and edited for brevity and clarity)

and to know that we're abiding in Christ? Or to connect it to the 2nd lesson, isn't that akin to putting on the armor of God?

Because, as I said before, it's not for solace only, but also for strength. And this is what I think critics of religion, or those who view religion as a crutch, are missing: our faith is not about escaping or avoiding difficulty; if we are seeking to abide in Christ, then we are doing so as members of a body that is being called to carry out God's mission here on earth.

And what is God's mission, you may ask? To tend the sick, to feed the poor, to shelter the homeless, to welcome the refugee, *to care for creation*, and to show up, with our bodies, at town hall and, apparently now, school-board meetings, and use our voices to speak out against white fragility, white privilege, and white supremacy, and *insist* that our full history be taught in our schools and institutions; yes, even that history which might be difficult for us as white people to hear and learn about. Because that is also part of what we are asking for, when we seek to abide in Christ. *That is* the cost of discipleship. So, Caro+ may be on sabbatical, but the prophetic witness of this church is not.

In closing, let us pray: Living Father, when we come forward to receive the Bread of Life and encounter the Cup of Salvation, we are partakers in the mystical body of your Son. We are members of Christ's body, seeking to abide in Christ, so that Christ might abide in us; in order that we might receive, through Christ's body and blood, the strength of your Holy Spirit, to go out and do Your work in the world. Amen.