

Did this morning's Gospel reading sound familiar to you? In case you haven't been in church the last three Sundays, the correct answer is, "Boy, it sure did!" It should sound familiar, because it follows immediately after the passage we heard last week, and it uses the same language to talk about the same theme. We're back in the Bread of Life Discourse in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. We were introduced to this Discourse on July 26th, and we will continue our exploration through next Sunday, August 23rd. Five weeks in a row we focus on the theme of Jesus as the Bread of Life. That should give us the strong impression that this is important stuff.

The lectionary offers up these readings to us one after the other with clear intent. Each of them speaks to a theme that is critical to our health and well-being. They speak to us of Jesus as our sustenance. At the outset of this Discourse Jesus begins by drawing a contrast between the temporal and the eternal, between things of this world and things that are beyond this world that we now know. The people had just come away from the feeding of the five thousand with full bellies, and that's where Jesus begins: "You are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." Then he gets more explicit: "I am the bread of life," and "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." And finally, Jesus speaks to his listeners using words that should make us squirm in our seats: "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

If those words don't stick in our ears and boggle our minds, there is something wrong. And if they're hard words for us, I don't believe we can begin to understand how shocking they would have been to a devout first century Jew.

For the devout Jew blood is the "life principal," or in Hebrew, *nephesh*. In ancient Judaism any exchange of blood or contact with blood was strictly forbidden.

Listen to the law from the 17th chapter of Leviticus: "For the life of every creature — its blood is its life; therefore I have said to the people of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off. All persons, citizens or aliens, who eat what dies of itself or what has been torn by wild animals, shall wash their cloths, and bathe themselves in water, and be unclean until the evening; then they shall be clean. But if they do not wash themselves or bathe their body, they shall bear their guilt." Leviticus 17:14-16

Even today there is a carefully prescribed procedure to draw out all of the blood in the kosher preparation of meat. First, the meat is soaked in water for 30 minutes; then it is taken out and salted and left to stand for one hour; then it's soaked again to draw out any remaining blood in the tissue before it's cooked.

So for Jesus' listeners these would have been scandalous, shocking words. But even if we can't fully understand how these words of Jesus would have been received by a devout first century Jew, if we're truly listening, they've got to feel like a kick in the gut. So if we're going to understand what Jesus was trying to teach in this Discourse, we need to begin by accepting that Jesus was not speaking literally. Jesus frequently talked about something outward and physical to teach about something inward and spiritual, and that's what he was doing here.

But in these graphic, shocking words, what was he trying to teach? I believe Jesus was telling us to lay off the junk food. We humans are great at trying to fill the voids in our lives with everything but the thing we need most, and I'm talking here about physical hunger, spiritual hunger, emotional hunger. We consume toxic, poison garbage in our cravings to feel full, and we're never satisfied.

I believe Jesus was telling us to give up all that literal and figurative junk food for the food that we can only get here, the only food that can spiritually satisfy us and nourish us and help us to grow and endure and truly live.

But how does that happen? What takes place in the eucharistic meal? That subject has come up often when I have talked with parents of young children. Sometimes a parent has said to me, "We don't think our child should receive Communion until he understands it." When that has happened, my response has often included a story of a priest colleague of mine. Some of you have heard this, but it's a great story and it bears repeating.

My friend told me about a family with a little boy who was five or six years old. The parents had decided that he shouldn't receive Communion until he understood what it meant, so every Sunday the little boy came forward to receive a blessing. Well, one Sunday the little boy got separated from his mom and dad, and he reached the front of the church first. As he reached the head of the aisle where Communion was being distributed, out went his hands, and my friend quickly decided that this was not the time to discuss eucharistic theology or family rules, so he put a piece of bread into the boy's hands. When he did that the little boy's eyes absolutely lit up. He put the bread into his mouth, turned around, threw his arms into the air and shouted, "I got the Body!"

I got the Body. That little boy understood plenty, and even if we don't express it in quite the same way, our reaction should be the same as his every time we receive the bread and wine, because when we receive this bread and wine we are united with Jesus and with each other in a way that does not happen at any other time, or in any other place.

This eucharist has the power to weave us together into a beautiful and sacred fabric in spite of all of the ways in which we differ from one another. A reality that must break the heart of our God is that there are some who choose to leave the table because of those differences. There are some who refuse to sit in the same pew with someone or kneel together at the altar rail

because of those differences. Don't we understand what Jesus was telling us in the Bread of Life Discourse? Don't we understand that to leave the table is to foreclose on any possibility for healing and reconciliation, that it can only lead to spiritual dis-ease? This is the place where all of life finds meaning — every joy, every heartache, every triumph, every disappointment, every dream, every failure.

In this meal all of life is placed within a sacred context. And if we're not here, if we don't come here to be fed with the food that leads to eternal life? Well, if we're not here that means we are someplace else, eating another kind of food.

Today Jesus has invited us again to put aside that other food and to feast on the food that will endure. The Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ have been given for you. Feast on the mercy, love and peace of Jesus Christ. The Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ have been given for you. Take and eat them in remembrance that Christ died for you — and be thankful.

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August 16, 2015
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La Jolla, California