



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

All In! Psalm 111; John 6:51-58

A little boy was waiting for his mother to come out of the grocery store when a stranger approached and asked, "Young man, can you tell me where the Post Office is?" "Sure!" said the boy, "Just go straight down this street a couple of blocks and turn to your right."

"Thank you so much," said the man. "I'm the new pastor in town. Why don't you come to church on Sunday. I'll show you how to get to heaven." "Awww, come on," said the boy, "you don't even know the way to the Post Office!"

Today Jesus is trying to tell us how to get to heaven, not at some time in the future, but right now. Jesus is trying to teach us how to live as if heaven is here and now. As John tells the story, apparently Jesus was having a difficult time of it.

For one thing, what Jesus said and the way he said it shocked people and, quite frankly, grossed some of them out! Hear again what he said:

"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. 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.
John 6:53-55

As we have heard repeatedly over the past few weeks, Jesus talked a lot about being the Bread of Life so that no one would ever be hungry or thirsty again. As we discussed last week, Jesus as the bread of life is a beautiful metaphor and helps us to understand how important Jesus is to our life and faith.

As he works harder and harder to impress this truth upon the people, his imagery becomes more and more graphic. At first he uses a common and polite word when he says "whoever eats of this bread will live forever." Then he switches to a different, less often used word for eating, a verb that your

mother warned you about over and over. When Jesus insisted, “. . . unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you,” basically he said, “unless you eat the Son of Man *with your mouth open*.”¹ Think about a cow chewing cud or a four year old showing you how many grapes she can squeeze into her mouth at once. It is a gross image in and of itself, but, in essence, Jesus is saying that we should take him into ourselves in such a way that it is obvious to everyone around us.

This language is not foreign to us. We use it every time we celebrate communion, but the words we use are so familiar and benign sounding that most of the time we do not really think about what it is that we are saying or hearing. Pastor Martin Copenhaver was reminded one Sunday how strange our words really are:

The communion table was draped, as always, in starched linen and set with silver chalices and plates and crystal flagon. The congregation was silent, even somber, as the pastor began carefully to read the words of institution in a solemn tone meant to add dignity to the proceedings. And “On [this] occasion,” he writes, “when I repeated Jesus’ familiar words, ‘This is my body, broken for you; this is my blood, shed for you’ a small girl suddenly said in a loud voice, ‘Ew, yuk!’ The congregation looked horrified,” he continues, “as if someone had splattered blood all over the altar — which, in effect, is just what the little girl had done with her exclamation.”²

If we are not careful, we can lose some of the imagery and meaning of these words when we celebrate communion, can’t we? After all, grape juice and homemade brittle bread are far cries from flesh and blood. This beautiful and clean sanctuary is a long way from the cross and the garden where Jesus died and came to life again. The people who heard Jesus speak these words clearly understood the imagery and the meaning, and some of them were not at all happy about what he said.

First of all, it smacked (pun intended) of cannibalism, a charge that was later made by opponents of the Christian faith. But more offensive to the

¹Scott Hoezee, “Commentary on John 6:51-58,” *Center for Excellence in Preaching* (August 13, 2018); available online at: http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-15b/?type=the_lectionary_gospel.

²David J. Lose, “Meeting the Carnal God,” *Dear Partner* (August 10, 2015); available online at: <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-12-b-meeting-the-carnal-god/>.

Jews was the blatant manner in which Jesus was inviting them to break their holy laws. Every good Jew knew that it was forbidden to consume blood of any kind and certain portions of flesh were reserved explicitly for sacrifices to God. They were enraged! Australian pastor Andrew Prior points out a few of the Old Testament passages that clearly prohibit such actions. He says,

Eating flesh was forbidden. It was associated with vultures (Ezekiel 39:17) and evildoers (Zechariah 11:9). Drinking blood was equally offensive. "You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood," said Genesis (9:4). "You shall not eat . . . any blood," said Leviticus (3:17). "You shall not eat flesh and drink blood," said Ezekiel (39:17).³

Jews believed that blood—whether of animals or humans—held the “spark of life.” When food was prepared, all blood was drained or cooked out of it. There were no rare steaks served at Jewish tables in those days! You can imagine how shocked people were at what Jesus said. Andrew Prior offers a clear description of their reaction:

Thus, the crowd listening to Jesus would hear his words, "eat my flesh and drink my blood," as blasphemy, as an abomination, as a violation of a core belief about the Holy, and our proper relationship with the Holy. These words of Jesus are akin to the words of the snake in the Garden tempting his listeners to eat a forbidden fruit; to violate a God-given commandment; to violate the sacred ordering of creation.⁴

Why in the world would Jesus say something so offensive to his listeners and so obviously counter to what God had taught the Hebrews for hundreds of years? Why would Jesus insist that a core component of faith is something that sounds so gross and offensive?

He was trying to tell us how to get to heaven—now and at some point in our future. He was trying to tell us how to live as if God is present in the world right now.

³Andrew Prior, "This Terrible Eating of Bread," *One Man's Web* (August 16, 2015); available online at: <https://onemansweb.org/this-terrible-eating-of-bread-john-6-51-58.html>.

⁴Prior.

Obviously, Jesus was not inviting anyone two thousand years ago or today to literally dine on his flesh and blood. He was, however, inviting every one of us to ingest his Spirit, to take in, not only his teachings and ways of relating to people, but his very essence. Jesus wanted his followers then and now to allow him to permeate our very being. One minister likened this indwelling of Christ to the experience expressed in a John Denver song that some of you will remember:

You fill up my senses
like a night in a forest,
like the mountains in springtime,
like a walk in the rain,
like a storm in the desert,
like a sleepy blue ocean.
You fill up my senses, come fill me again.⁵

Jesus wants to fill each and every one of our senses with his presence and grace. He wants us to ingest him so that he becomes our flesh and blood. He wants us to inhale him so that he becomes the oxygen that sustains our life and powers our heart and mind and soul. He wants to be the nourishment that enables us to grow strong and healthy in every way. Jesus wants us to take him into ourselves in such a way that we do not know where we end and he begins or vice versa. As David Lose reminds us,

. . . “flesh and blood” is a Hebrew idiom which refers to the whole person, heart, mind, spirit, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, everything. In Jesus, you see, the whole of God meets us to love, redeem, and sustain the whole of who we are, good, bad, and ugly.⁶

Jesus is trying his best, not to gross out everyone within hearing, but to get us all to understand the seriousness of his commitment to us. He is willing to give himself completely for our well-being. The beautiful anthem written by Delores Dufner that we just heard details what God in Christ offers to do for us. He invites each of us who is thirsty, weary, burdened, repentant, distressed, needy, abandoned, or orphaned to come to him and he will provide what we need:

⁵John Denver, “Annie’s Song, *Back Home Again*, RCA Records, 1974. This idea was suggested by Frederick Dale Bruner as cited by Scott Hozee.

⁶Lose.

“Come to me, all pilgrims thirsty; drink the water I will give.
“Come to me all trav’lers weary; come that I may give you rest.
“Come to me, believers burdened; find refreshment in this place.
“Come to me, repentant sinners; leave behind your guilt and shame.
“Come to me, distressed and needy; I would be your trusted friend.
“Come to me, abandoned, orphaned; lonely ways no longer roam.⁷

Jesus is trying his best, not to gross us out, but to get us to understand the seriousness of his commitment to us and the commitment he expects of us. If Jesus is willing to give his body and blood for us and to us (as he obviously did), shouldn’t we be willing to give ourselves completely to him? If Jesus is “all in,” he expects us to be all in as well.

In some ways, Jesus is trying to explain that Christian faith is not a Sunday afternoon tea party, nibbling on cheese straws and cucumber sandwiches. Instead it is a full blown barbecue where you roll up your sleeves, tuck a napkin under your chin, and dig into the entree and all of the fixins. Jesus is talking about commitment. He is all in. Are we? Are we fully committed—heart, mind, soul, and strength—as he clearly is? Are we willing to give faith our all?

A pig and a chicken were walking down the road one morning when the chicken turned to the pig and said, "Hey, why don't we open a restaurant together?" The pig looked over at the chicken and said, "That sounds like a good idea. What do you want to call it?" The chicken thought for a moment and said, "Why don't we call it 'Ham and Eggs'?" "I don't think so," said the pig, "I would be fully committed, but you would only be involved."

God in Christ wants us to be more than just involved. He wants us to be fully committed. He wants us all in—flesh and blood and heart and soul. Are you all in?

⁷Delores Dufner, "Come to Me, All Pilgrims Thirsty," (Augsburg Fortress Press, 2007).

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Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How welcome is your invitation to those of us who are feeling thirsty and weary, burdened and repentant, distressed and needy, or abandoned and orphaned, O God. Too often we put on our pleasant faces, dam up the sighs and tears, and lock away our fears and needs so that no one else will know that we are dying inside. You, however, know us better than we know ourselves and invite us to come to you for life. Thank you.

Thank you for loving us in spite of ourselves. Thank you for loving us because of who we are. Thank you for being for us all that we need in order to be whole again.

We have mentioned some of the needs carried by people who are on our minds today. We want you to help them and let them know that they are not alone in their struggles. We speak other needs in our hearts which you hear and to which you respond. We are silently screaming our own needs to which you whisper a calming and reassuring word of peace. Help us all, O God.

It would take too long to catalogue the concerns that we have which stretch across our world, but they are, nonetheless, on our hearts. We know that you need us to help solve some of these problems. Open our hearts and minds and hands to the things that we can do to answer these prayers. Open our lives to cure the ills that perplex us all.

Thank you, O God, for caring and loving and making us whole. Help us to do the same for one another in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.