

In our gospel lesson this week, Jesus takes the metaphor of living bread to the next level. He becomes graphic and visceral, describing the bread that he gives is his flesh and that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have eternal life, that whoever eats him will live because of him.

If you are not mentally saying “ew gross” to yourselves, then you do not appreciate the shock value of his words. Neither cannibalism nor the drinking of blood were acceptable in Jewish culture, in fact they were considered anathema. Understandably many of the Jews who are listening to Jesus speak are either freaked out or revolted.

Now in all probability everyone who was listening to Jesus was Jewish. Jesus himself was Jewish and so were his closest followers. John uses “the Jews” as a description for those who did not believe what Jesus was saying. John’s gospel was written some 50 years or so after Jesus’ death when the differences between orthodox Judaism and those Jews who believed that Jesus was the messiah were becoming unreconcilable. The split was painful to those who believed, and John’s expression is meant to highlight the distinction between the two perspectives.

Although Jesus’ words are indisputably radical, some of his listeners would have connected the metaphor that he uses describing himself as the bread from heaven with the Jewish mystical tradition that looked on God’s bread from heaven, manna, as another metaphor for God’s holy word. Hebrew scriptures contain some references to “eating God’s holy word”, a food more necessary to life than even bread.

In Deuteronomy 8:3 Moses reminds his people that *“one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”*

In Jeremiah 3:15 God says to Jeremiah, *“I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.”* (Jer 3:15 NRS)

Farther along in Jeremiah 15:16 Jeremiah says, *“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts.”* (Jer 15:16 NRS)

Psalms 19:9-10 describe the taste of God’s word saying *“... the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb”* and 119:103 says, *“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”*

The most explicit example of eating God’s word comes from the prophet Ezekiel when God says *“But you, mortal, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe. He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey. He said to me: Mortal, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them.”* (Eze 2:8-3:4)

And finally in Isaiah 55:1 God extends the invitation to feed on God’s word to everyone, *“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor*

*for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food."*

Therefore, when Jesus claims to be the "bread from heaven" that needs to be eaten it is conceivable that those of his listeners familiar with scripture would have understood his connections between manna, and bread, and God's word.

Nevertheless, this doesn't make Jesus' claim to be that living bread any less shocking or even blasphemous, it's just that his use of the metaphor did not come out of nowhere.

Unfortunately, some medieval Christian theologian's interpreted Jesus words literally, contributing to their lingering grossness factor and confusion over what really happens in the Eucharist and the multiple interpretations that are held across Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions.

This extended preamble leads to the old adage "you are what you eat" which is what Jesus means when he says that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood abide in him and as he abides in them. Even if we are not chewing on bits of flesh and drinking cups of blood, we are partaking of the one who offered himself for us unto death on the cross. It was his flesh that would be sacrificed for us that he might be in us as we in him. In Rite I we are reminded of Jesus' words when the priest distributes communion, "*The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in your hearts, by faith, with thanksgiving.*" (BCP pg 338)

Bottom line, the Eucharist, this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, is a Holy Mystery and it has the power to transform our lives – if we let it.

In just a few minutes I will present the Bishop's Cross, an honor given to those who have made a significant contribution to the life of the Church, to Jeannine Cranor and Conni Still, primarily for the extraordinary contribution their founding of the Thrift Shop has made to our lives together as a community. The Thrift Shop makes money for the parish, but it is also a place of fellowship, hospitality, comfort, ministry, and evangelism. This venture, grounded in the faith of these two women, and directed towards the support of this parish, has been successful thanks to their vision, execution, and management over the past eight years. Together, their work for the Body of Christ, as part of the Body of Christ, that has been fed and nurtured by the Body of Christ, is an example of what it means to be transformed in Christ.

Now to all those who know them well this is not to say that either Jeannine or Conni are perfect examples of what it means to be a Christian...(sorry ladies) but rather that they have tried and succeeded in opening themselves to the process of sanctification, of moving deeper into their faith so that it is not a matter of believing "facts" about what it means to be a Christian but actually trying to live out their faith.

We are thankful for their witness, as we are thankful for the witness of all those who have gone before us who have shown us what it means to follow Christ.

Amen.