

St. Paul's, Concord  
August 25 & 26, 2018  
Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69  
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This is the fourth week in a row that bread has featured in our gospel passage. And, as has been pointed out before, there's a connection between the "Bread of Life" in chapter 6 of John's gospel, and the bread we share in Holy Communion.

The Eucharistic overtones in these passages are quite apparent for those of us who regularly partake in God's holy meal. After all the main purpose of the Eucharistic meal is the renewal of our faith, the strengthening of our commitment and the revival of our spirit. So yes, in retrospect, Jesus' claim to be the Bread of Life may well have included a foreshadowing of Communion meals like the one we'll share today. But I think there was much more to it.

Three weeks ago, we heard how Jesus was sharing an important message with people who were very slow to take it on board. Those people were asking for bread to fill their stomachs but Jesus was explaining that what they really needed was the food that would last for ever. They needed the "true bread from heaven" that "gives life to the world". (John 6:32 & 33) And it was in that passage that Jesus first declared himself to be the "bread of life."

Our gospel reading last week continued with that theme, but it took it into a whole new realm – one that's repeated in today's passage. Up to now, Jesus has compared himself figuratively to bread, making the point of spiritual sustenance. But in these verses, he's actually inviting the crowd to eat the bread which is his own flesh.

Remember that these people have no experience of the Eucharist. They don't know about Communion wafers and sweet wine. When a man says they must eat his flesh and drink his blood the suggestion of cannibalism must be quite powerful. And strangely enough, Jesus adds to that impression. The Aramaic word used when he tells the people they must feed on him, is a word that's often used to describe animals eating. It has connotations of gnawing and tearing at flesh. Imagine what the reaction would be to *that* image!

These are Jewish people with strict food laws. Not only are they forbidden to eat meat from an unclean animal but they can't eat *any* meat which still has blood in it. So when Jesus effectively says they must *wolf down* human flesh and drink human blood, it's even more abhorrent to them than it would be to Gentiles. But Jesus isn't simply being obnoxious. He's making a vitally important statement and he's prepared his audience very carefully for it. He's made a logical progression, from the bedlam that followed the feeding of the 5,000, through a consideration of treasured Hebrew traditions, over obstacles to seeing, hearing, comprehending and – most of all – believing, then on to a well-structured and persuasive argument. (John 6:24, 45-50)

Through patient use of what are really effective teaching devices like repetition, affirmation and tantalization, Jesus brings his audience to the brink of understanding ... then he delivers the body blow. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." (John 6:56)

Why does Jesus' language change so dramatically in these later verses? Why does he shift his focus from symbolic bread to his actual flesh and blood? And why did he prepare the ground so thoroughly? What purpose did Jesus serve by gaining the people's acceptance of himself as the Bread of Life – and then repelling them with gory imagery?

The answer lies in the reaction of the crowd. They're horrified by the idea of eating human flesh and drinking blood because it so utterly contradicts their Jewish traditions. They never expected the long-awaited Messiah to oppose their strict food laws – or any other laws laid down by Moses. And yet Jesus insists that devouring him is their only hope of eternal life.

But he didn't really expect them to feast on his flesh, did he? No, but he was asking them to do something equally gruelling. He was asking them to change in ways they'd never considered. Ways they'd never dreamt of in their worst nightmares. He was asking them to give up ingrained habits and beliefs and behaviors in order to make space for the new way of life he was offering. And the food laws were only the beginning – for the Jews of the first century and for Christians through the centuries that followed.

Jesus continues to challenge us to let go of what's safe and familiar. He continues to show us new and unexpected ways – and some of them may seem as unthinkable to us as the idea of cannibalism.

For every challenge Jesus offers, there are some who can meet it and some who cannot. We know from today's gospel that many people who heard Jesus' graphic words couldn't accept them and so they turned away. But those who did hear and believe took a giant step in their journey of faith.

And as we look back on customs and traditions that were never questioned before the time of Jesus – and even during his time on earth – we can see just how great his influence has been. Polygamy, slavery and racism have all been challenged by Jesus' teaching – with varying degrees of success. The striving for wealth and power continues to be too great an addiction for many Christians, but some have overcome it and discovered the freedom Jesus promised. And every now and again we see evidence of peacemakers succeeding where armed conflict has failed.

Over the years, the Episcopal Church has faced many challenges to firmly held beliefs and traditions, beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Church of England broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. That long-ago refusal to be ruled by a distant and increasingly irrelevant authority is a significant aspect of our identity today.

Our Church is committed to serving a changing world, to keeping abreast of needs that arise as a result of technological, political, environmental, and societal developments. As our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, reminds us frequently, we are the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus movement – and a movement doesn't stand still.

But, just as the break with Rome caused uproar in the Anglican Church – and brought about a period of violent division that lasted for decades – not every new direction is eagerly and unanimously embraced!

The legislative body of the Episcopal Church is General Convention. Like our Government, it is bicameral: the House of Deputies is made up of laypeople and clergy from over a hundred dioceses, and the House of Bishops is made up of the bishops from those dioceses. Every three years this body gathers to consider and vote on resolutions dealing with everything from budget to liturgy to mission, social justice, formation, stewardship, evangelism – in short every area of our Church's life and ministry. At the 79<sup>th</sup> General Convention in Austin last month, a record 502 resolutions came through the legislative committees.

So you can imagine that there is rarely 100% agreement – either in the convention centers or back in the home dioceses and parishes. There have been times when resolutions were adopted and people left the church as a result. In 1976 General Convention approved the ordination of women to the priesthood and the Episcopate – and, although the decision was received with widespread rejoicing, many Episcopalians felt as though the rug had been pulled out from under them. In 1979, when our new Book of Common Prayer was approved, there was a similar reaction.

At this year's General Convention, we acted on over 30 resolutions relating to sexual discrimination, exploitation, and abuse; we passed a compromise resolution authorizing continued trial use of marriage liturgies for same sex couples – making provision for those dioceses whose bishops hold a more traditional view of marriage; we approved a compensation structure for the President of the House of Deputies – a position which up to now has been unpaid. And we voted in numerous resolutions responding to racial and immigrant injustice, care of creation, gun violence, the Middle-East conflict, and many other areas where views are often divided. Probably one of the most contentious topics was how the Church would move forward with our Book of Common Prayer. One of the proposals was a complete revision over a period of several years and costing millions. What we decided was to retain our existing Book of Common Prayer and open up a range of options to use other liturgical resources – which is what we're already doing, with our bishop's permission, here at St. Paul's.

As human beings, we do find it very hard to relinquish our hold on things we feel comfortable with. And I think it's clear that we've had to do that a lot over the years – as a Church as well as individual people of faith. Each one of us knows how difficult it can be to accept things we disapprove of – even if Jesus tells us we must. But Jesus himself let go of a safe, pain-free existence and accepted the agony and terror of death on a cross. *That's* what we remember in this service when we share the bread and wine that represent his body and blood.

Jesus came to challenge the ancient laws of Israel and to break the bonds they'd created. He came to challenge every convention in history that threatens to limit the growth of his kingdom. And he continues to challenge us today by showing us those places and situations that require a fresh perspective and the willingness to bring about change. And, as Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, when we put on the armor of God, we are equipped to respond to those needs.

It's easy to feel safe and comfortable with the familiarity of taking part in the Eucharist every week. And it's true that it provides strength and nourishment to continue the work Jesus began. But it also challenges both us and the world to rethink what we take for granted. Sometimes, as with Jesus' image of eating his flesh, we will be shocked – even horrified – and our first reaction may be to turn away. That's when we most need to allow Jesus to open our eyes – and our minds – and consider doing something new.