

Feasting on Jesus

John 6:56-69
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First Presbyterian Church
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When we were in the pandemic lockdown worshipping online via Zoom, I remember celebrating communion with y'all, everyone using whatever bit of grain-based food and juice-like drink that was on hand at your homes. For instance, I know that some used donuts and orange juice. And I'm pretty sure I don't want to know what others used, though I'm sure it was fine.

Theologically, we are supposed to use the "bread of the people" and "juice of the vine," in keeping with the practice of Jesus and his earliest disciples. And practically – in such unusual, temporary circumstances – we are free to use whatever we have at hand, whatever we can faithfully receive as gifts from God to nourish us body and soul.

This is because, as Presbyterians who embrace the Reformed Tradition, we receive communion spiritually more than physically, whereas Catholics and many orthodox Christians hold to the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Transubstantiation says that the bread, when consecrated by the priest, is actually changed into the body of Christ, the flesh of Christ, since the Risen Lord is present in our world – body and blood, soul and divinity.

In today's New Testament lesson, Jesus' teaching about the body and blood of Christ seems to support belief in transubstantiation, where he says, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

And yet, Jesus doesn't specifically say the bread and juice of communion actually become his flesh and blood. That's why we in the Reformed Tradition don't make that theological leap, especially since Jesus often spoke metaphorically – in parables and the like.

I mean, think about it. Jesus was not afraid of saying things plainly and clearly when he wanted – things like following Jesus is more important than family, wealth, status, and yes at times, even comfort. These are all hard teachings, and yet they are very clear and easy to comprehend, if not embrace and follow.

So, what does Jesus mean when he says, "... Whoever eats me will live because of me" – what does this teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood really mean? That's what we're going to explore today.

Let's start with that bit of scripture I just mentioned – "... Whoever eats me will live because of me." If Jesus doesn't mean this literally, what does he mean?

Well, think of a mother and her unborn child. Each and every one of us came into this world while we were literally feeding on the body and blood of the woman who gave birth to us. Wow! That's pretty incredible.

And it gives us a real-life example of Jesus' spiritual teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Nobody that I know of has actually eaten the flesh and drank the blood of Jesus, but we all need to have the life-force of Jesus inside us, just like we all needed the life-force of our mothers as we entered into this world.

Speaking of eating the flesh of Jesus, I remember one Sunday morning during the pandemic when I was celebrating communion with ya'll. My wife, Yuri, had just baked a fresh loaf of bread, which I was more than happy to use as my communion bread on Zoom. As we prepared to eat the bread, I said, "Let us partake in body of Christ." And when that bread hit my taste buds, I heard myself saying – over the microphone – "Umm. Delicious!" I had to laugh. Jesus, that morning, was particularly delicious.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." Now that is a delicious way to live.

But what does it mean to abide in Christ? It means that we abide or live in and by the essence of who Jesus is. As Jesus says, "Whoever eats me will live because of me," just like all of us live because of our mothers, because we were nourished as unborn babies literally by the body and blood of our mothers.

So that's one hard teaching explained, to some extent. And here's another. It's not just any life we live because of Jesus.

Extending the metaphor about his body and blood, Jesus says, "This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

If we don't want to die – spiritually if not also physically, prematurely – we have to take Jesus into us, into all of who we are. And we have to live our lives in Jesus; we have to live by the power of Christ and for the sake of Christ.

John tells us, "When ... his disciples heard it, (many of them) said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'"

Why is that teaching so difficult? It's because living by the power of Christ and for the sake of Christ means that all else falls away, that everything else in life is subservient to our identity, our calling, and our practices as Christians.

Now, when I say all else comes second to your calling as a Christian, I mean everything else, including the family members who refuse your invitation to come along with you to church – Jesus is more important. And this also includes the money you give as a real-life, concrete and consequential symbol of your love and trust in God, the everyday choices you make as you refrain from ungodly practices, even when everyone else is doing it, as you maintain godly, faith-based practices, even when so many others don't.

The temptation to give up on Jesus and the church because life is too hectic, too complicated, too distracting, too demanding, too uncertain – it's all subservient to our faith, the faith we cling to in a world that has largely abandoned the promises of Christ and the certainty that God is large and in charge.

Look, it's hard to be a Christian! It's hard to find the time and energy and fortitude to continue studying God's word, nurturing your faith, and living in the way and manner of Jesus.

"Because of this," says John, "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?'"

Jesus had just spoken to them what he called "the words ... (of) spirit and life," knowing, as John says, that "among (them) there (were) some who (did) not believe."

And here's the thing. Jesus does not ask that we understand, but only that we believe – believe that Jesus is the Bread of Life and the Cup of the New Covenant; believe that we can and must take into ourselves the essence of who Jesus is, body and soul, as if taking in food and drink; believe that the only way to truly live is to live by the power of Christ and for the sake of the Lord, regardless of the cost, regardless of the struggle, regardless of the temptation to be with those who choose not to be here, the temptation to chase after a consumer-based, easy-does-it, no-pain-all-gain existence, which we and everyone knows really doesn't exist.

Jesus does not ask that we understand all this, but only that we believe and follow. Jesus asks the twelve disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" And Simon Peter says, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

First, we believe, and then we know. Slowly and through every moment of our lives, through all the ups and downs – we come to know, know that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

First, we feast on Jesus, then we live in Christ, now and forever. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of infinite love and grace, we come to you ever thankful for this place of worship and this time of prayer.

We offer our thanks for our family gathered here and ask that your healing presence be with those in our family who are ill, and with those who are homebound, and especially those we lift up in prayer at this time....

We pray for those who mourn with a sorrow too deep for words, and thank you our family gathered with you. Help us to catch a vision of what we are to be because of who these dearly departed loved ones were for us.

Open our hearts, O Lord, to the strengthening presence of all who love us, in this life and beyond.

Enter into our hearts that we might be moved to walk with Jesus wherever we are led.

It is in his name that we pray, joining in the prayer that he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.