

## Proper 15B 2021 Sermon

August 15, 2021

### **John 6:51-58**

*Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

*The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 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." (NRSV)*

“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.”

It almost sounds like something out of a vampire movie! It’s no *wonder* the Jews “disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’” This is *shocking* language – hard for Jesus’ listeners to stomach! And, “Drink his blood?” The Jewish Law forbids any Jew from eating meat with any blood in it at all (no rare steaks for Kosher Jews!), since *blood* was thought to be the sacred life of the animal. So *scandalous* is this language about eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood that even Jesus’ own *disciples* have a hard time with it, as we will see in **next** week’s Gospel. Some of Jesus’ disciples even stop following him because they cannot stomach this scandalous, appalling language! (John 6:60-66) Rumors even circulated among some opponents of Christianity in the first centuries of the Church that Christians were *cannibals*.

But, what you and I must remember is that this is one more instance of Jesus using **symbolic** language and his audience *hearing* it in a **literal** way. When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, Nicodemus asks, “How can I crawl back into my mother’s womb and be born again?” (John 3:1-17) And when Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that he will give her Living Water, she says, “But you have no bucket!” (John 4:1-39) Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus **speaks symbolically**, but his audience **hears** him *literally*, and therefore, misunderstands. But John wants his *readers* – you and I – to know that when Jesus says, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you,” he is not speaking about eating Jesus’ **literal**, *physical* flesh and drinking his literal blood; rather, he is using powerful, shocking symbols to grab our attention, so that he might convey to us the profound meaning, message,

and purpose of Holy Communion, the Eucharist – which this whole 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John’s Gospel (that we have been reading) is all about.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach famously said, “You are what you eat.” Feuerbach was advocating for materialism and atheism over and against Christianity. There is no need to attribute anything spiritual to human beings, he argued, for we are simply the sum total of what we eat!

And, on the strictly physical, *cellular* level, he is right! It has been estimated that in an adult human body, 1 million cells die and are replaced each second, and the molecules needed to build those new cells come from the food we eat. So, in a strictly *physical* sense, we **are** what we eat – the molecules of the food we eat *become* the molecules of our bodies.

And, to a point, John would have agreed with Feuerbach, for John knows that we humans have a material nature. But, at the same time, John knows that our material nature is suffused with the spirit and being of Christ, the Eternal Word of God which, as John tells us in his Prologue, “became flesh...” (John 1:14) The Divine became one with what is material and physical in what Christians call “The Incarnation.”

But John **also** understands that Holy Communion, the Eucharist, is *more* than simply **symbolic**; it is *sacramental*. In receiving the bread or wine of the Eucharist, we are, in some inexplicable but no less *real* way, **actually** taking Christ into ourselves. This is the whole reason Jesus gave us the gift of Holy Communion. It was not so that we might fondly remember that poignant night, 2000 years ago, when Jesus had his Last Supper with his disciples. No. Jesus wants **us** – you and I – to take his very being, his substance, his spirit, his consciousness, his mind, love, forgiveness, grace – his life! – into **our** very beings. He wants to get **inside** us, so that we might become one *with*, and *in*, him. St. Paul speaks of this experience of living *in Christ* when he writes, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:19-20) And C.S. Lewis put it this way: “The Church exists for nothing else but to draw [people] into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself are simply a waste of time. God became [Human] for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose” than becoming the incarnation of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

My friends, I am convinced that the correlation between eating food and having the molecules of that food truly become **us**, and eating Christ and having *his* life become *our* life, is not a *loose*, speculative analogy; it is very substantial and organic. “Just as ...I live because of the Father,” Jesus says in today’s Gospel, “so whoever eats me will live because of me.” Jesus is speaking of a very real incorporation of *his* being into *our* being, in much the same way food becomes our bodies. We take a bite of an apple, and we chew that morsel of apple. The

enzymes in our saliva start to break it down. We swallow that morsel, and the gastric juices in our stomachs break that morsel down even further. At what point does that morsel of apple cease to be “apple” and start to be “us?” Similarly, at what point does the wafer of bread which we eat at Holy Communion cease to be bread and become “Christ in us” or “Christ as us” – Christ making up the very cells of our bodies and the substance of our souls?

Now, putting food into our mouths and swallowing it begins an *automatic* process of changing the food into the cells of our bodies. We don’t have to *think* about digestion; it just happens. But consuming Christ in the Eucharist and digesting his life so that *His* life becomes *our* life is **not** so automatic. *Something* needs to happen for the transformation to take place. What is it? Do we have to understand and believe what is happening in the Eucharist before it can transform us? Well... understanding and belief might help. But what Richard Rohr suggests is even *more* important is coming to communion with a hunger to be fed with the food of Christ, and being fully present ourselves to the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

“Eucharist is [**our**] presence encountering [**God’s**] Presence,” Fr. Rohr states. “[It is] mutuality, vulnerability... It *feels* so empty, naked, and harmless, that all you can **do** is be present. The Eucharist is telling us that **God** is the food and all **we** have to do is provide the hunger. Somehow we have to make sure that each day... there’s room inside of us for another presence. If you are filled with your own opinions, ideas, righteousness, superiority, or sufficiency, you are a world unto yourself and there is no room for ‘another.’”<sup>2</sup> No room for God. And so, we come to Eucharist with open, humble, hungry, vulnerable hearts, emptied of self so that we might be filled with the life and being of Christ.

“All my life as a Catholic,” Fr. Rohr states, “I have believed that the Real Presence of Christ **is** in the Eucharist. *Now* I **also** recognize that the very concept of *presence* is inherently and necessarily *relational*. We Catholics can defend the doctrine of the Real Presence all we want (and I do), but if we don’t teach the children of God how to be *present to [God’s] Presence*, there **is** no Real Presence for them!”<sup>2</sup> And this relational nature of being mutually present extends to the other people with whom we are worshiping! Holy Communion is never *just* between an individual and Christ. St. Paul says that those who receive Holy Communion without recognizing the Body (which means the rest of the members of the Church) bring judgment upon ourselves. (1 Cor. 11:29)

Richard Hooker, the 16<sup>th</sup>-Century foundational theologian of Anglicanism, said, “The real presence of Christ’s most precious Body and Blood is not to be sought for in the Sacrament, but in the worthy receiver of the Sacrament.”<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr says that if we leave the altar rail after receiving communion and bow to the altar or genuflect as we re-enter our pew or leave the building, we have missed the point: Christ is now **in** you, **in** me! He has become *part* of us, and continuing to bow to Christ in the bread and wine “out there,” *outside of ourselves*, on the altar

or in the tabernacle, is to intimate that we did not receive him in the bread and wine and were not ourselves transformed, which is the very reason for the Eucharist!

“The Eucharist is an encounter of the heart,” says Fr. Rohr, “knowing [God’s] Presence through our available presence. In the Eucharist, we move beyond mere words and thinking with the rational mind and go to that place where we don’t *talk* about the Mystery anymore; we begin to **chew** on it. [In fact, the original Greek word in today’s Gospel (verse 54) is not ‘eat’ but ‘chew’ or ‘gnaw’.] Jesus did not say, ‘Think about this more’ or ‘stare at this;’ he said, ‘[Chew this, digest] this!’...

“We must move our knowing to the bodily, cellular, participative, unitive level. Then we keep eating and drinking the Mystery, until one day it dawns on us in an undefended moment, ‘My God, I really **am** what I eat!’”<sup>2</sup>

The Body and Blood of Christ: Behold who you are, become what you receive. Then we really will be what we eat.

AMEN

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: Touchstone, 1996, p. 171
2. Quotes from Richard Rohr are taken or adapted from Richard’s talk *Eucharist as Touchstone* [CD](https://store.cac.org/products/eucharist-as-touchstone-cd), [MP3 download](https://store.cac.org/products/eucharist-as-touchstone-cd)) <https://store.cac.org/products/eucharist-as-touchstone-cd>
3. <https://www.classicsnetwork.com/quotes/topics/Body?page=11>