

August 16, 2015 12th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Proverbs 9:1-6, Psalm 34:9-14
Ephesians 5:15-20, John 6:51-58

(davidlose.net/2015/08, day1.org/4043-eating_Jesus, Sara Miles in Take This Bread, pg. xi)

Grace and peace to you, beloved of God. Amen.

There was a debate going on, a controversy raging in the early church around the time John penned his gospel.

It was all about the Lord's Supper, and in many ways it's been debated through the centuries since.

You heard the words, "Those who eat of my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life."

So, what does happens in that supper? Are we really eating Jesus body? And, drinking his blood?

And if we are, they'd continue, then isn't this an abomination?

...That's what the law and prophets say, we know our Hebrew Bible.

You and I might just scrunch up our noses and cock our heads: is he really talking about cannibalism?

It sure sounds like it, but, that's not what I signed up for.

After we get past the yuck-factor of cannibalism, this debate seems so abstract, what is the point, really?

All this talking, all this debating, all these ways John has Jesus trying to explain himself again, and again, I mean, this is the 4th Sunday of all this talk about the bread of life.

Really, Jesus? Really, John? Just get on with it, or let it go.

Martin Copenhaver, the President of Andover Newton Theological School, tells of serving a congregation with its beautiful, white starched altar linens, and a dignified, respectful communion liturgy. One day as Martin got to the communion words we hear each Sunday, "This is my body broken for you, this is my blood shed for you," a small girl who was listening closely pronounced loudly, "Ew Yuk." He continues, "The congregation looked horrified, as if someone had splattered blood all over the altar-- which, in effect, is something like what the little girl had done with her exclamation."

I love how Jesus began this story of the feeding of the 5000 at the start of the 6th chapter.

Remember how that goes? the hillside, the crowd, the disciples saying, send them away, there are too many of them, and it's getting late, they'll get hungry.

I love Jesus confidence.

I love the abundance of fish and loaves, and the little boy who offers them up.

I love the leftovers.

I love how Jesus positively exudes hospitality as the crowd, the community, is fed.

But then, after that story, it seems, Jesus and John start spinning, you know, like when you're not sure what to say and you go on and on and on trying to weave a plausible explanation.

Forgive me, but that's how it sounds.

It turns out, Jesus isn't spinning at all: he's actually spelling it out so plainly we all but miss it:

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life,” he says, “For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”

He's not spinning, not in the least... Jesus is speaking the truth: this is the incarnation.

This is the little baby, Emmanuel, born of Mary and Joseph, at once human and divine, **now all grown up.**

This is the one whose very body will be stretched on the cross, caught in the politics and power of his day.

These are the hands that will be bloodied.

This is Jesus who holds the sinner, and welcomes the outcast, and cries for the world, for you and me.

God, in-carnate. God, in-flesh, God, not lofty and far off, but actually in flesh, in blood, here, now.

David Lose reminds us that flesh and blood is actually a “Hebrew idiom which refers to the whole person, hearts, minds, spirit, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, everything.”

He continues, “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.”

The God who meets us in flesh and blood, knows, too the power of our flesh and blood:

In these early days with you all here at Hope, I am so grateful for the time to get to know many of you.

We're sharing stories, and to a person they are stories of flesh and blood, loss, hope, meaning, work, prayer, change.

There is power in these stories:

The cries of labor pain, the messiness of relationship, the depth of contentment,

The physical changes of age and all the emotion and spirit that accompany,

The sweat and exhaustion of trying our best, and making peace with our strength and our vulnerability.

In your stories, you are telling me again about our God who in flesh and blood meets us at the table, who knows our hunger, our need, and who feeds us, again and again.

This week I've been reading an article in the Atlantic by Ta-Nehsi Coates, it is called Letter to My Son.

As an African American man, writing to his 15 year old African American son, Ta-Nehsi Coates says,

“All our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.

You must never look away from this,” Ta-Neshi writes to his son. Never look away.

These are graphic words, as graphic as Jesus’ talk of flesh and blood.

Too easily even that which is so needed, so important, like talking about race, moves from a heart and body thing to a head thing.

Ta-Neshi won’t let that happen, not for his son, because it is about his very life, his very body, and his son’s.

As a white woman, it is *tempting* to muse about race and the painful issues of our land,

But truth is, I am also a mom of kids of color, and I am part of a transracial family, and really, I cannot look away, we cannot look away, for it’s about flesh, about blood, about our kids, about our communities.

It’s not a head-thing to simply discuss, but rather a flesh and blood thing to value and love, to lament and reconcile, these are our neighbors, this is the body of Christ broken again.

Did you hear our reading from Proverbs this morning?

Wisdom is a female biblical image for God, she’ll make her way through the scripture, through tradition, and we hear about her again as the Word made flesh at the very start of John’s Gospel.

She’s in a way a precursor to Jesus, with God, in God, part of God, from creation onward.

In today’s reading, Wisdom has built her house, and set her table, and she cries, Come, eat and drink, lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

She’s aged and matured, and in our reading today hosts this massive feast.

There’s something grown up going on in our scriptures this morning.

For the little girl’s honest, Ew, Yuk at the Communion Table is, in a way, replaced by wisdom, by maturity.

Jesus means it, he spells out his life and death, his flesh and blood, given for the world.

When we can so truly bring our bodies, our selves—our whole selves—to the table,

When we can dare listen and hear the experience of Ta-Neshi Coates and so many others,

When we can meet our neighbor not on some head-level, but as Jesus’ own flesh,

When we can risk being part of the body of Christ, the whole church,

Then our eating and drinking at this Table takes on a power, a love, that can truly change the world.

And it starts with you, and it starts with me, and we’re left never quite the same. Thanks be to God. Amen.