

Our Gospel read today follows right on the heels of the story of the feeding of the five thousand.

*“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”.*

As the bread of life Jesus is *“the bread that came down from heaven.”* Though described with an essential image from ordinary life (you gotta have bread to survive!)—Jesus is unique. He even defies comparison with the miraculous manna that sustained the Israelites during their time in the wilderness. Those who ate the manna “died.” They were nourished only for a day. But as the bread from heaven, Jesus gives the life of the age to come, the life that has about it that tang of eternity, *“so that one may eat of it and not die.”*

This bread from heaven, then, satisfies the human hunger both now and for the future.

At verse 51 in our reading, we have a little shift, when the bread is described as something Jesus *“will give for the life of the world”* and is specifically identified as his “flesh.”

No doubt our minds shift to the crucifixion with those words.

The biblical scholars at this point often debate whether John is a sacramental Gospel—in which this piece of Jesus’ speech replaces the words of institution left out at the Last Supper, or whether John is a non sacramental Gospel and uses those phrases like *“eat my flesh”* and *“drink my blood”* simply as vivid and kind of shocking metaphors for abiding in Christ.

What did (or did not) the author of the Gospel intend by the words used? The experts can’t seem to agree, so how are we to wrestle with this passage? (And this is the point in sermon writing when my

mind goes sort of blank, and I hope for some sort of divine intervention to guide me...and keep my fingers typing!)

The problem is that we all, as modern readers, cannot totally get back into the mind of an ancient author and figure out the intention behind the words. I think this passage is particularly challenging in that respect...we are kind of stuck with the words.

But, for me, it is nearly impossible to escape or ignore the eucharistic flavor of those words, particularly when they are drawn together with an allusion to the death of Jesus. And yes, this is not Communion Sunday, but perhaps this passage invites us to reflect on its meaning when the congregation is gathered at the Table. (or in your pews, if you utilize some sort of unit-dose Communion).

These invitational words from Brian Wren in *Let All the World* kind of summed it up for me:

*What do you bring to Christ's table?*

*We bring bread, made by many people's work, from an unjust world where some have plenty and many go hungry.*

*At this table all are fed and no one is turned away.*

*Thanks be to God.*

*What do you bring to Christ's table?*

*We bring wine, made by many people's work, from an unjust world where some have leisure and many struggle to survive.*

*At this table all share the cup of pain and celebration, and no one is denied.*

*Thanks be to God.*

*These gifts shall be for us the body and blood of Christ.*

*Our witness against hunger, our cry against injustice, and our hope for a world where God is known and every child is fed.*

*Thanks be to God.*

The words of “*what do you bring to Christ’s table*” remind us that the eucharist is a participatory act, rather than just about presence or sacrifice. The dominant verbs in our Gospel read are “eat” and “drink,” rather than “believe”. Taking part in the sacrament draws one into the very life of Jesus. The verb “abide” appears in verse 56, which is all about a sort of mutuality—sharing in common. Partaking of the elements binds the participant in a unique way to Jesus—who “loses nothing” of what God has given him.

Sacrifice in ancient times was not complete without the taking of part of the sacrificed animal to create a meal for worshippers. This sacramental act was not only between the divine and a worshipper, but also between the people. If what Christ was doing echoed traditional practices of sacrifice, part of that tradition requires the doling out of what we receive to others—what we are feeling filled and healed by is not meant to be kept to ourselves or to the communion table.

Anytime we prepare a meal and set a table, it has the potential to be a sacramental act. To share of ourselves and our resources—is a physical embodiment of the act of Jesus giving his all.

In a Bible study session called “*Eating and Drinking Our Way to the Kingdom*” there is this story:

“During the time we were developing this series of lessons, we visited Heifer International’s working educational farm in Massachusetts with a group of youth and adults. Heifer has helped millions of hungry people all over the world through the gift of livestock and the training in their care. Our group gathered for a devotional before we went to the farm, and one elder reported later that the Gospel reading about Jesus feeding the 5,000 was stunning and simple. Jesus cared about feeding people. This thoughtful man had considered the spiritual aspects of feeding many times, but

Jesus' physical feeding of people time and again came home to him in a new way as the Gospel was paired with the care of goats that would ensure a family's survival."

Rev. William Barclay in his book *The Gospel of John* says this: "Christianity would be a poor thing if Christ were confined to Churches. It is John's belief that we can find Christ anywhere in a Christ-filled world. It is not that he belittles the sacrament; it is that he expands the sacrament, so that we find Christ at the table in the Church of Christ, and then go out to find him everywhere where people meet together to enjoy the gifts of God."

The debate continues in some circles and power structures of Christianity about who has access to the table or who is deemed worthy or not or who is to be included or left out.

We say, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcome here". The Good News is that Jesus indiscriminately welcomes all. All are welcomed, honored, and forgiven in his presence. He feeds the hungry to the point of giving his life.

The church is called to the same pattern. We have the opportunity to practice radical fellowship and hospitality.

We have the freedom to set a table, and to add additional leaves to that table. To create a healing, life-giving, empowering space which points to the greater picture of Christ as the bread of life.

Thanks be to God!