

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Sermon by Rev. Erik Broeren
Sunday, August 18, 2024

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood, abide in me, and I in them. (John 6:56)

As I walked back into the room, the evidence of my transgression was staring me in the face. Had this been a crime scene, surely a jury of my peers would have convicted me without a shadow of doubt. It all began so innocently; sure, as I sit down to write, I say to myself: “let’s have a cookie.” But one cookie turns into two cookies, turns into three cookies. And there it is: absent mindedly the whole pack of cookies is gone, without a second thought. The empty box mocks my vain attempts to lead a better, healthier life.

I recently learned there is a name for my affliction: kuchisabishii. No, it’s not contagious; there is no cream, pill, or surgery to fix it; you just learn to live with it. Kuchisabishii is a Japanese word that describes the universal human experience of mindless eating. That is, the eating we do while we are really focused on doing something else. In my case, the mindless snacking on cookies that happens while I am writing. The implied offense of this phenomenon is that when we eat or drink, we really should be more focused on that act so we may truly taste the flavors, the structure, the layers, the sweetness, the tartness, the crunch, etc. of what we are eating, and fully appreciate the experience and the joy. A valid point. Before we return to the Gospel, one more comforting thought from Japan. Kuchisabishii literally means *lonely mouth*, so we could say that mindless eating is really an act of kindness – while we are busy doing other things, munching away on cookies, or some more healthy option, really makes our mouth feel less lonely.

Jesus says: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.” (John 6:51a) For the past few weeks, the lectionary has been leading us, slowly but steadily, along Jesus’ teaching on the bread of life. But as his teaching evolves, the misunderstanding and frustration has

been growing among the crowds following him. It all started so gloriously with the feeding of the five thousand on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. As Jesus travels to the other side of the Sea, the crowds follow him, with hope and expectations. Moses had fed God's people in the desert with manna from heaven; here is a new teacher who does the same. Let's make him king, the people say (John 6:15), so we may have this bread every day (John 6:34). But Jesus rebukes them, saying: "our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. (John 6:49-50)

Jesus does not merely give us the bread of life, but Jesus is the bread of life, we read last week. And today he makes the next logical steps: "the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:51b). The confusion is now complete: how can this man give us his flesh to eat? (John 6:52) Even if eternal life were the reward, cannibalism does not seem a valid option. But Jesus doubles down: "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." (John 6:53b-54)

I get it. The thought that Jesus could actually be talking about eating human flesh and drinking human blood is beyond absurd. But one of the charges levied against Christians during the Roman persecutions was that Christians practiced cannibalism. The other common charges being atheism – that is, refusing to acknowledge the emperor as a god – and incest – from misunderstanding how Christians called each other brother and sister. Ironically, in later centuries Christians would accuse Jews of cannibalism too, as their justification for the persecution of Jews, and worse.

Of course, Jesus is not talking about eating human flesh, and drinking human blood as the way to salvation. For us to understand what he is talking about, we need to step and recall the larger picture that John paints of Jesus in his Gospel. First and foremost, Jesus is God's Word made flesh; Jesus is the divine incarnation. Eating the body of Christ and drinking the blood of Christ has nothing to do with the consumption of human flesh and blood, but everything with our communion with God. In the Body and Blood of Christ, God incarnate, a bridge is made between the human realm on one side (the realm where everyone and

everything passes away in their appointed time), and the divine realm of God, on the other side (God, who is light and love, and without change, and utter transcendence, that is all that is not of this world). In the incarnation of God's Word in Christ, these two distinct realms have been bridged, and in eating from the Bread of Life, we too participate in the union of the earthly and the divine. Jesus assures us: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood, abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:56) as a sign of that new divine union, wherein we will no longer die.

It's a new reality, and it's no surprise that those who hear Jesus speak these words for the first time are lost beyond understanding. Yet, unless we want to think of Jesus as a mere distant memory – a wise man who preached and healed people two-thousand years ago; a prophet and a martyr – we need a sacramental understanding of our reality. It is not enough to just listen to Jesus' words and follow his example, to the best of our ability. In eating and drinking we experience our own real union with God, and we are fed in ways that no food can ever accomplish. As one commentator on the Gospel puts it, eating and drinking are metaphors for how we receive what Jesus offers his followers. To experience Jesus' saving power, believers must feed on him: "must absorb his teaching, his character, his mind, and ways; [as followers of Jesus, we] must appropriate the virtue in him till his mind becomes our mind and his ways our ways; till we think somewhat as he would do if he were in our place, and can be and do what without him we could not be or do; and this because his power has passed into us and become our power." (Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, 573-574)

It is this, and more, that we practice in our weekly Eucharistic meal. We are right not to treat the bread and wine casually, mindlessly eating and drinking. But we should not consume with reservation either. The communion we receive is not a reward for a righteous and faithful life. No, it's only through communion we have a fighting chance to live up to our greatest dreams and ambitions; the covenants we make with each other and with God: to love our neighbor, to defend human dignity, to work for justice, to remain steadfast in our prayers. So let us gather around this table, whenever we can, for strength and comfort, for forgiveness and renewal. Amen.