

Proper 15, Year B  
August 18, 2024

*Taste and see that the Lord is good;  
Happy are they who trust in him!* Ps.34, vs 8

I am the living bread. I am the true bread. I am the bread of life, whoever eats my body and drinks my blood will live forever.

In addition to uncomfortable weather conditions and air quality alerts, these last several weeks have been a challenge for those of us writing sermons or choosing hymns. I mentioned in my sermon last week at St Stephen's that the St James Press, which offers free choral music online appropriate to the church's seasons, labels this time in the church calendar as the season of carbohydrate Sundays.

The author of John, as is well known, speaks much of the time in metaphors: not my flesh is like bread – a simile – but my flesh is bread, I am bread. Imagine someone now or in those times, curious about this Jesus and his teachings, someone searching for answers in a world of injustice, oppression and giant gaps between the “haves” and the “have-nots” visiting a gathering of Christians for a worship service where words about eating a person's flesh and blood are used. Early Christians were in fact accused of cannibalism, one of the many objections voiced by both the Roman and Jewish authorities to this fringe group.

It's always interesting to me how we get ourselves stuck in popular phrases: “wake-up call” was a big one. The one I'm thinking of this morning is “wrap my head around.” I can't quite wrap my head around “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” There have been ideological battles fought for centuries about what happens to the bread and wine brought to the table at the Eucharist: does the tasteless wafer from the worship supply store actually become Jesus' flesh and the Gallo Tawny Port his blood? And, if you are not Christian, do not attend Eucharists, and do not partake of the bread and wine, are you dead?

What does it mean to eat something? What happens to things we eat? At the very least, they work their way into our bloodstream, strengthen muscles, bones, replenish vitamins and minerals necessary for health, are processed by various organs and what we cannot use, we eliminate. (Obvious simplification coming from a non-medical person!) I'm thinking also of our pets who will occasionally try something they find on the floor or outside in grass or water and either eagerly consume or dramatically reject with a sort of disgusted sneeze/snort. And then there are young children told to eat all the foods on their plate, "at least try a bit," we say; and the very young who, when they discover their hands, delight in grabbing at everything and Whatever Grabbed goes straight into the mouth. When we eat, we "take in" something that our senses tell us will please us, satisfy a craving, fill the emptiness and hopefully strengthen, heal and rejuvenate us.

Matthew, Mark and Luke – the Gospels referred to as the Synoptics – are concerned with showing the human-ness of Jesus: he is a healer, he eats and drinks with folks, he is a shepherd, he teaches, he is a story-teller. All three of those Gospels have an account of what we call the Last Supper, where Jesus uses words with which we are familiar and comfortable: this is my body given for you, this is the blood of the new covenant. We hear these words in the context of remembrance: when you sit at table for a meal, think of me, remember me; remember that my body was broken and my blood shed for your sake and for the sake of the whole world. Although Jesus had spoken to his disciples about his imminent betrayal, arrest and death, it seems they did not fully understand the significance of what he was saying and wouldn't until after the fact. In John's Gospel we're not sitting around a table sharing a meal with close friends – a bit confused, listening to our teacher telling us not to forget him the next time – and every time – we eat bread and drink wine. In John, we are a few of thousands coming together in a very public place for a very public outdoor festival – not unlike one of our state fairs: thousands milling around, including Jewish "higher-ups," hoping for the Roman authorities to arrest Jesus. Then, almost to bait the authorities, Jesus announces: 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 is the divinity of Christ which demands our attention in the Gospel of John: Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah is not made of human flesh and blood, but spiritual flesh and spiritual blood – true food and drink – come down from heaven. If you believe, if you eat, if you “take in” to yourselves, your souls, and bodies my life, my death, my rising from death, you will live forever; that which you have “taken in” will supply your needs. I will give you life as the Father has given me life.

It is taking me a lifetime to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the meaning, the significance of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; to puzzle out in my heart and mind the mystery of Jesus’ flesh as true food and his blood as true drink; to taste and see for myself that the Lord is good. Is it God the Father who speaks most clearly and often to me? Is it Jesus, the Bread of Life, to whom I relate the closest? Or is it the Holy Spirit who motivates me to brave troubled waters? It is a lifetime of listening with our hearts, being fed with the Body and Blood of the Lord, Jesus Christ - a lifetime relationship with God who promises us eternal life if only we trust in him.

*O taste and see how gracious the Lord is;  
Blest is the one who trusts in Him.*