

I Am the Bread of Life

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John 6:51-58

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“May my words be a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.”

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven . . . unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. . . . The one who eats this bread will live forever.” Have you ever really listened to these words? We’re so accustomed to them, hearing them in some form in our weekly celebration of the Eucharist, that I’m not sure we pay attention to them. For non-Christians, these are strange words indeed, that we would eat and drink of our god. And for us as Christians, they can be very hard words if we step back from them and try to discern what they are telling us about this man Jesus.

For some help with this, I pulled out my copy of William Barclay’s commentary on the Gospel of John, which we used in a Bible study perhaps 20 years ago. Barclay says that to the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, these words were not at all out of keeping with their understanding of sacrifice. The Old Testament is replete with stories of animal sacrifice. But the entire animal was not usually burned: a token was burned at the altar, and part was given to the priests as their due. The rest was given to the worshipper to make a feast for himself and his friends in the temple. At that feast, the god was the guest, and once the flesh was offered to the god, the god himself entered into the food. And so, when the worshipper ate his portion of the sacrifice, he was literally eating the god. As Barclay says, “when the people rose from such a feast they went out, as they believed, literally god-filled. . . . in them there was now the dynamic vitality of their god.”

We can see why the friends and followers of Jesus would not have found this passage unusual, and why John doesn’t explain what Jesus meant. But we need help: we need to pull it down to our earth, here in the middle of Michigan. We are obviously not a people of sacrifice. Christians long ago heeded the words of God that he did not require animal sacrifice (or grain, or any other form, for that matter). The early Church determined, once and for all, that Jesus was the final sacrifice. The Eucharist is our remembrance—our re-enactment—of his death and resurrection. The official Episcopal understanding of the Eucharist is that the bread and wine are not literally the physical presence of Jesus, but instead his spiritual presence. I suspect that some would not even go so far, but would say that the bread and wine are symbols only. And yet, we have before us the command of Jesus to eat his flesh and drink his blood if we are to have life in us.

As I read this passage, I thought of two passages in Paul: that we are to put on the armor of Christ, and that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. In other words, our belief in the message and person of Jesus will necessarily lead us to “putting on” and

taking “into” ourselves the very essence of Jesus. We will be filled with the Spirit, with the “dynamic vitality” of Jesus. This is perhaps a daunting idea, for I think it is infinitely simpler to think of eating the body and drinking the blood as a ritual act that feeds and comforts us, but that doesn’t ask us to do anything further. more challenging is the realization that the spirit resides in us, and in a world where we no longer see the physical Jesus, we must act as his heart and hands. That means feeling in our bodies and souls the cries of marginalized men, women, and children throughout the world. As Wayne said in his most recent E-news, we must ask ourselves, when we see the needs of the world: “Can we do more?”

This past week we’ve had many examples in the press of those who did more, and more, and more. Foremost in my mind is Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who died a few days ago. From childhood she knew that she must do more: her parents told her over and over that she had been given much, and that must give much in return. She took this to heart. Motivated by her sister’s struggles with developmental disabilities, she founded the Special Olympics, an organization that has brought dignity and meaning to countless men and women who used to be invisible in our society. For her tireless work, which continued until recently, President Reagan awarded her the Presidential Medal of Honor in 1984.

This past week, President Obama has awarded his first class of Medalists. Among them: Eunice Shriver’s brother, Ted, who has championed the poorest and most powerless in our country; Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who resisted apartheid in Africa and was the architect of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; Professor Muhammad Yunus, who developed the use of micro-loans to help the poor of Bangladesh, and eventually the world, get access to credit; Pedro Jose Greer, Jr., whose medical center in Miami treats thousand of homeless patients each year. And there were several more honored, all men and women who had achieved much, and who chose to give back to nation and world.

Closer to home, there was a note in Thursday’s *Detroit Free Press* about the launch of Mitch Albom’s latest book. The proceeds from this event will go to fund programs in Detroit that house and train the homeless. As you might recall, a few Christmases ago, Mitch inspired the people of Detroit—as well as readers of the *Free Press* all over the state—to flood the Detroit Rescue Mission with desperately needed funds. That work still goes on. Closer yet is the work of our own diocese in the Gulf Coast, where we have made a ten-year commitment to help rebuild from Hurricane Katrina. Today, Carol Abbott, a parishioner from St. David’s in Lansing who has been on one of the mission trips, will be available at coffee hour to share her pictures and her stories. Our hope this year, as last, was that every congregation in the diocese will contribute a minimum of \$500 for this work. And we hope too that some of you might want to go to New Orleans or Mississippi late this fall or early in December.

“Eat my flesh and drink my blood, and you will have life in you.” These words are central to Christianity. And yet, not all of these people I’ve mentioned are Christian: Mitch Albom is Jewish, and Muhammad Yunus is Islamic. But they are all living their

lives as though they have imbibed the body and blood—the very essence—of God, of Yahweh, of Allah, of Jesus, of the Holy Spirit. They will indeed live forever, because the work they do ripples out, healing bodies and souls, inspiring others to reach out, and reach out, and reach out, world without end. And we, when we take into ourselves the essence of God—whether in bread and wine, or in the words of the Scriptures—we too will want to do more. We too will live forever.