

“Ewww!”
(John 6:51-58)

8-18-24

This week’s Gospel reading is a continuation of last week’s, where Jesus makes the very audacious claim that he is the “bread of life”; that he is the true food that falls to us from heaven. And I compared what the experience of Jesus must be like, to a snowflake falling from the sky; where you stick out your tongue to catch it and you feel it melt on your tongue; pure and refreshing. That is what Jesus is like; a gift to you and to me, direct from heaven.

This week’s Gospel reading continues where last week’s left off. Jesus continues to describe himself as our food. But now he makes a sudden shift from talking about himself as our bread to describing himself as “flesh” for us to eat and his blood as what we must drink.

Part of what he is reinforcing, is the idea that we should take his being into ourselves; that we should consume him, so that we can become more like he is. That is the understanding I think most of us jump to. And it is not wrong. However, imagine hearing these words with the ears of someone who has not made that jump.

It is one thing to eat a freshly baked piece of bread or take a sip of wine to symbolize our unity. But eating another human being and

drinking his blood? My first response is “Ewwwww,” that is very disturbing! And I’m guessing that your first response would be the same. I don’t think that there is anyone who’s first impulse isn’t to recoil at the thought of ingesting another person’s flesh or drinking that person’s body fluids.

And we know that people who lived during Jesus’s time responded in the same way. In fact, one of the claims that opponents made against early Christians to label them as creepy, was that they practiced cannibalism as part of their sacred rituals (which as you know, they didn’t).

So, why does Jesus switch from the nice vision of becoming like him through the eating of heavenly bread, to this predictably disturbing way of talking about taking him in that seems like the opposite of heavenly?

The word for “flesh” in Greek (*sarx*) was understood to refer not only to actual flesh, but also to all the things of this world that are not of heaven. And Jesus pounds us with this word; using variations on the phrase “eat my flesh” six times and mentioning drinking his blood four times, all in the seven verses of today’s reading.

So you can't come away with any conclusion other than that he wants you to consider that eating him involves more than a pure heavenly experience; that it is also a very worldly and somewhat disturbing experience.

An Earthly Experience

Jesus himself is not squeamish about these things. He is touching and being touched by people who are suffering from all manner of diseases all the time. And he is not at all offended when, for example, a woman who is bleeding, perhaps menstruating, makes her way through a crowd and touches his cloak; an act that was seen as a defilement and strictly forbidden.

But Jesus sees this very differently and commends her for her faith. As far as he is concerned, she is not contaminating him at all. Quite the opposite. The moment she touches him is a moment in which a blessing is given and received.

And part of what Jesus was revealing there and in today's Gospel reading is that keeping ourselves separated from the world of the flesh, out of the desire for heavenly purity or from the fear of being contaminated doesn't make us either pure or whole.

Quite the opposite. What makes us pure and whole is actually our willingness to bypass our initial aversions and fear of being contaminated, so that we can be touched and blessed because, paradoxically, it is in the depths of this world of flesh that the bread of heaven is actually to be found.

The Dementia Exhibit

On Thursday, I went in to the Greenfield Library to write this sermon and in one of the side rooms there is an exhibit on dementia. On each wall there are a series of photos of the faces of people with dementia of one kind or another. The pictures are big, around three feet long and two feet wide, so that you can look into their eyes and you can see all the wrinkles and contours that seem to tell you something about each one's life experience. The people range in age from about 50 to over 100. So they are people with real life experience.

And beside each photo is a short biographical essay and description of the vibe that the photographer got from meeting and interviewing that person.

So why would anyone want to enter an exhibit on dementia, much less spend time with people who have dementia? Why would anyone want

to spend time looking at the faces of people unlucky enough to be afflicted by a terrible disease that has robbed or is robbing them of so many of the things that made their lives worth living? It is a very tragic, sad and disturbing thing to contemplate.

And just as disturbing, why would you want to enter a room and look at pictures of people who remind you that your own memory lapses may be a foretaste of the same fate?

On the other hand, why wouldn't you enter that room? Why would you or I want to walk past it and lose the opportunity to dispel the illusion that those people have nothing to do with us, or that such things could never happen to us? Why try to pretend that you and I are only living in a heaven where only good things happen to us, when we are living in an earthly reality, where dementia or some other tragedy will eventually sideline us? That would be living in denial of reality. And the religion of Jesus is not about running from reality. It is about trusting that heaven will come to us even as we look the disturbing side of reality in the face, without blinders.

A Taste of Heaven

So, my curiosity drew me into the exhibit room. And I'm glad I went in because there really was a taste of heaven waiting for me in that exhibit.

When you see those faces, weathered and shaped by life and you read of their often surprising accomplishments and experiences, you don't feel repelled at all. Instead, you feel (or at least I felt) a common bond, a sadness, but also something beautiful in recognizing myself and my own experience in them.

Seeing them gives me peace in that knowledge that I no longer have to pretend that, when people see me, they are seeing anything other than one more aging person with bumpy skin, like the people in the pictures and like the folks who sit by the elevator in nursing homes. No-one looking at them has any idea of where they've been and what they've done without pausing to check out their bios. But each one has within a hidden beauty, like a pearl hidden in an oyster and so do you and I.

I came out of that exhibit feeling a secret joy. I'm one of them and it's ok. I may be fast becoming a little old man, but when I see these people and think of what God gave them and gave me, when God gave

us our lives, my insides tremble with joy, because I know that what we have been given is a blessing beyond measure. I realize that it is possible to live a life that is appears to be very modest in its achievements and even eventually tragic, and at the same time feel incredibly blessed within. And that in itself a taste of heaven.