

1 Kings 8 selected verses

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

For a moment, just try to imagine that you are a visitor here this morning with absolutely no knowledge of Christianity: its beliefs, rituals, history, traditions. Imagine watching the motions we make with our hands in the sign of the cross and having no idea what it means or why people would do that. Imagine watching a cross being processed down the aisle and people bending at the waist when it passes by. And imagine your reaction to the words we use at the Eucharist. Or what you just heard read in the Gospel. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” I actually had a child ask me, at the communion rail, if there was blood in the chalice I was offering to him. Who can blame him?! We have some very weird practices when viewed through the eyes of the stranger to Christianity.

There is currently a short video circulating among clergy on social media of a young, edgy, beautiful, Lutheran Pastor Intern, not unlike Nadia Bolz-Weber in her approach to ministry. She pushes the boundaries of what we tend to consider “proper” leadership behavior in the church. In this little video, Elle Dowd is asked to poorly explain what she does for a living. Here’s what she says. “On special occasions I, like, drown babies. And then once a week or so I host a cannibalistic meal where we feast on the body and blood of our deity. And then during this ritual, usually before, I give a motivational speech based on the ancient freedom texts of my ancestors where I urge people to overthrow the world order and work to build something new.”

That sounds ridiculous, but it also sounds a lot like what Jesus is calling for in the gospel reading today. We are to feed on Him and focus our lives on creating the kingdom of God.

The setting of this reading from John is at a time when the tone of Jesus’ ministry is changing. Up until this time, large numbers had been coming to witness his miracles, confess their belief and be baptized. But now, resentment and jealousy are growing as Jesus’ popularity is threatening to rock the social and religious order of the time.

So some of his followers just turn and go. “Nope, that’s too much, you’re asking too much of us, we didn’t sign up for all this.” Those individuals had followed Jesus as long as they were getting something from him, as long as his career was on the upswing. Now Jesus is saying that intellectual buy-in to his Word is not enough, there is an extremely high moral demand in play here as well, and that there is no path to following Jesus that doesn’t involve the Cross, both his and ours.

Following Jesus is just as much about giving as it is about receiving. And that giving is what adds the Christian dimension to life. Christian giving comes from a reservoir within us. A reservoir created when Jesus abides in us, and we in him.

In this passage Jesus says that eating his flesh and drinking his blood are necessary for this abiding. Even for those of us who do believe, and do use those words in our liturgy, their graphic nature can be a stumbling block. Especially if you are prone to be a literalist like I am. So let's take a look at why Jesus would use such graphic language. In traditional Jewish teachings, the blood of the animal stands for life. And life and blood belong to God. The blood is not to be consumed. So what Jesus is saying when he says we must drink his blood is that we are to take His life into the very core of our being.

Think of it this way. What is an experience which has profoundly shaped your life? If that experience was something you read about, or heard someone tell in a narrative, it wouldn't be YOUR experience. It would still be outside of you. But because you experienced it, it becomes something internal, something you can draw upon and share. It becomes something useful and something which shapes your responses to the world.

I routinely encourage my hospice patients and their families to "feed on" the memories which brought them joy and meaning in life. Even for those who don't have a belief system to hold on to, it's where they can go for perspective and hopefully, to find meaning. When Jesus says "eat my flesh and drink my blood," he's saying that we must take him into ourselves so that His presence is always with us. So we don't have to go looking for meaning and hope outside ourselves. We KNOW where and how to draw upon the divine.

Jesus wants us to stop thinking of him as just an historical figure or a subject for theological debate. That keeps Christ "out there" and separate from us. We are to take him into ourselves, not in theory, but in soul filling, life giving ways. And we must move into him as well, into the Divine presence, even in this world which does so much to distract us from an awareness of God's constant presence.

Notice the active verbs in what I just said. "We take him into ourselves. We move into him." This relationship with Christ does not just happen, as if by osmosis. In a class I'm working on we're studying the anatomy of cells and how they function. If you remember back to high school biology, the cell membrane plays a very important role in maintaining the health of the cell by managing what comes in and what goes out. In osmosis, substances move passively across the membrane in order to achieve equilibrium of concentrations. In active membrane

transport, energy is required to move nutrients into the cells and waste products out. The work of abiding in Christ does not happen passively. It's an active transport mechanism. It requires effort and intention and commitment.

By cultivating within ourselves an intimate relationship with God we are able to find it even when the circumstances of life try to suck us dry of the will to even pray. And that relationship is also what propels us to follow the moral imperative Jesus set forth for us. To this day, many reject Christ, not because he puzzles the intellect, but because he challenges the way we live. So being able to feed on the body and blood of Christ requires more than the Eucharist. It is where we come to be reminded and refreshed, to be challenged and embraced. But it's just the start.

Christianity would have little to offer if it were confined to churches and communion tables. The dinner table, the diner counter, the picnic blanket, the restaurant booth, are all opportunities to feel what it is to "take, eat, this that is given for you." Appreciate, enjoy, take into yourselves, the gifts of God for the people of God. They are everywhere!