

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 08/18/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, August 18th

John 6:51-58

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Doing life or having life?

Unlike most humans that have ever lived and most humans alive today, we in the West are able to spend much time and energy attempting to plan and live the life we desire (even in this economy!). Why then do we inevitably find ourselves asking these questions: “What am I doing with my life?” or “Is this all there is?” Despite our best efforts, nothing seems to satisfy another kind of hunger we have within us, no matter how much worldly bread we eat. This theme emerges in the text this week - the fourth week in a row in the sixth chapter of John. The unpacking of the feeding of the five thousand continues. Having declared He is the bread of life, and this bread is His flesh; in this week’s Gospel lection, Jesus declares the only way to have life within us is to eat His flesh and drink His blood. Any other diet leaves us empty and hungry. The lectionary over the last few weeks is bringing us to an inevitable question we must ask: Do I have life within me? Am I merely *doing* life, or do I *have* life?

John 6:51-58 Commentary

Three weeks earlier, Jesus fed five thousand hungry people in the wilderness with five barley loaves and two fish. The meaning behind this sign has progressively been revealed in the lectionary text each successive week. The crowd saw only bread and did not understand the true meaning behind this sign. In the lectionary two weeks ago, Jesus challenged us to consider the bread we eat – is it perishable or does it endure to eternal life? Last week Jesus declared Himself to be the bread of life who was the living bread who came down from heaven. This week, Jesus declares the only way to have life within us is to eat His flesh and drink His blood. Any other diet leaves us empty and hungry.

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

The opening verse is the final verse in last week’s Gospel lection. We begin where we left off with Jesus introducing a shocking new metaphor – Jesus is the bread and the bread He gives is His flesh.

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

The “Judeans” (*Ioudaios* - a term common in John which, rather than an ethnic term, is often used to represent the religious leaders in Jerusalem who were hostile to Jesus) continue to confuse the symbolic and the literal. We recognize the allusion to the crucifixion and can connect this expression to the Lord’s Supper/Eucharist. To the original audience this must have been totally repulsive and shocking.

⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

Rather than seeking to explain His last statement, Jesus goes further – He now includes drinking of His blood. For those taking Jesus literally, they would have been even more appalled. Drinking of blood was forbidden (Leviticus 17:10-14). Furthermore, the imagery invoked in v.54 is even more shocking. The word rendered as feeding (*trōgō*) is to eat with loud chewing sounds – to chomp or gnaw. This is a different word than “eat” in v.53 (*esthiō*). The imagery conjured by chomping on Jesus’ flesh may or may not be significant as they are sometimes used interchangeably. There are parallels between v.54 and v.40 (omitted from the lectionary): “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (v.40). Thus, feeding on Jesus’ flesh and drinking His blood is a metaphor for believing. The true food and true drink mean that belief in Jesus is the only way to true satisfaction – every human being is created with a hunger and thirst for God.

⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.

Jesus continues to go further. Eating (believing) leads to the idea of mutual abiding (a theme common in John’s Gospel). This theme is further explained in chapter 15 and modeled upon the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and is made possible through the Holy Spirit (14:15-20; 17:20-21). Jesus has life because of the Father. Anyone who believes in Jesus will have life. “Whoever feeds on me” in v.57 without the use of “flesh” is a clearer metaphor of feeding meaning believing.

⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”

Jesus concludes by differentiating Himself from the bread (manna) their forefathers ate in the wilderness and still died. Anyone who feeds on Jesus, believes in Him, has eternal life, and will be raised on the last day.

Reflection and Application

Some interpret this text as a reference to the Lord’s Supper/Eucharist since such is otherwise omitted in John. However, there is a noticeable difference in this text between the word choice of “body” and “flesh.” Others advocate the need to consider this text in its own context and conclude the theme of eating is a metaphor for believing and not the institution of a sacrament. Perhaps a comparison with our method of celebrating the Lord’s Supper is worth considering in the context of this text and developing theme. In the Reformed context, the Lord’s Supper is celebrated somewhat infrequently and often with a thin wafer of unleavened bread that dissolves on the tongue without the need to chew. This is a far cry from the imagery of chomping loudly and earnestly to devour Christ’s flesh – perhaps with the same ravenous hunger as the crowd chomped down on the bread and fish during the miraculous feeding or the love feasts of the early church.

An uncomfortable question to ask is which of these images most accurately reflects our belief? An infrequent, reverent sacrament which is served individually while wearing our Sunday best or a crowd of people sat in family groups in the wilderness ravenously devouring miraculous food with awe? Belief in Christ is the way to have life. He draws us to Him. Jesus makes life possible, not just living. He is our bread we must devour daily. The life we have is a direct reflection of the passion of our belief. Do we merely claim Christian identity, or do we *believe*?