

Bread of Life - Week Four

John 6: 51-58
August 18, 2024 – Don Ghostlaw

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today I'm thinking about Christmas, as I have in late summer for many years now. Not about the religious element of Christmas, but about the commercial element. I have a somewhat large, very elaborate outdoor display, with lights synchronized to music that you can listen to in your car. It takes several months of planning and execution to complete that display.

When we lived in Tolland in 2020, the last time I was able to set it up, it filled my lawn and jumped across the street (wirelessly) to our neighbor John's house. It took John and me about 80 person-hours to put it up. It won the first-ever Tolland Christmas light contest in 2020, and John and I split the \$50 gift certificate to a local pizza place that they awarded us. And just to be clear, we didn't just commercialize Christmas for the sake of it. We had a bin and a sign urging people to drop off non-perishable food items. Since we had been doing it since 2013, by 2020 people started dropping off food items before we even lit the display for the first time! We dropped off four full carloads of food to the food pantry in Vernon that year, more than any other year in the past.

Aside from my family and friends, I have two earthly joys in life, gadgetry and electronics, and Christmas. It goes back to my childhood, and maybe some

of you can appreciate this from your own youth, when Christmas was filled with lights, sparkle and presents from a child's perspective. I anticipated Santa coming for weeks, not just days. I remember the year I got my first record player, and my first train set. My parents were quite generous to their four boys. As adults, the feeling sometimes now is quite the opposite – we may think “finally, it is over!”.

My Christmas display is a chance to merge my two joys together. I have videos of the 2020 display that I can show you at coffee hour, just ask. I am going to try to do the lights at our new East Windsor house this year and will let you know if I do.

The only problem with all of this, of course, is that the Christmas season ends and then I must take it all down and put it away. I stop running the show on the second Saturday in January, but I keep the lights up in part because I want to continue experimenting to make the display better for next season. But mostly I don't take them down right away because with the anticipation of Christmas now over, I become a very good procrastinator. My wife's rule is that the display has to be down and put away by Easter, and some years I have just managed to meet that deadline! It doesn't take nearly as long to take them down as it does to put them up, so I have absolutely no excuse other than that the motivational joy is gone.

I have the same anticipation and joy, albeit without the hours of work, when the new iPhone is about to come out every year. But once it arrives, and I set it up and see what it can do, it's over until the next time. I've slowed down a bit. My current iPhone is two generations old. Sometimes I lie awake in

the middle of night thinking about that. Cindy and I are downsizing – last year we bought a smaller house (for us), and since I retired earlier this year, I have been bringing old gadgets to the electronic recycling center in town. Each time I drop off these old gadgets, I feel that I am throwing away moments of prior joy. How many of us have moved from a larger house to a smaller house and had to go through everything that accumulated throughout the many years you lived in the larger house – I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy! Doing that is proof positive that all of it is momentary.

I readily admit that my love of earthly things is not dissimilar from the Jewish people following Jesus who kept longing for mana from heaven. I just want to be fed, whether it's nourishment or dopamine, and then wait it out until the next dose. There is nothing wrong with anticipating and experiencing joy – it is an important part of being human. As Christians, however, Jesus asks us to keep our perspective. We can either just keep generating joy until we can't, or we can believe and trust in Jesus and make him a part of our being.

For the past three Gospel readings, and again today, Jesus has been steering his followers from focusing on how they were fed with the loaves and fishes and asking them instead to believe in him and accept him as the bread of life. In the reading three weeks ago, Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. Two weeks ago, Jesus asked his followers to think about the food that they eat, and whether it is perishable or does it bring eternal life. And last week Jesus said that he is the bread of life, the living bread that has come down from heaven.

Today Jesus gets much more graphic – he is perhaps frustrated that the Jewish leaders refuse to accept his message of eternal life. So, he increases the intensity of the metaphor. Today, Jesus asks his followers to eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood in order to live forever. The Greek word for “eat” has changed in today’s reading as well, from meaning “eating” to “munching” or “gnawing”, tearing at the food with passion, and to drinking his blood, which is expressly forbidden in Leviticus chapter 17. Interestingly, the bible note for this Leviticus passage in my NIV translation states that “The Jews took this prohibition [against drinking blood] seriously, and that is why Jesus’ hearers were so upset when Jesus told them to drink his blood. However, Jesus, as God himself and last sacrifice ever needed for sins, was asking believers to identify with him completely. He wants us to take his life into us, and he wants to participate in our lives as well.” Despite all that Jesus has done in these last several readings to explain this, the Jewish leaders at Capernaum just don’t understand, or perhaps some do understand and refuse to acknowledge.

In fact, immediately following today’s reading, John goes on to say that many of these followers declare that this teaching is too harsh, too offensive, and they leave. It’s almost as if they are saying “if you will not feed us as you did before, and continue showing us signs, it’s time for us to leave.”

A couple of weeks ago I read in Atlantic magazine about a group of Silicon Valley billionaires engaging in something called “biohacking.” The leader of this group is named Bryan Johnson, a man in his 40’s who claims to have reduced his age by several years using a combination of diet, exercise, and experimental medicine. He strongly believes that we don’t have to die, it is possible to live in our human form forever. Jesus’s followers would have

likely believed in the biohacking form of living forever than the claims Jesus was making through his metaphors – it’s just less harsh. Unlike the followers of his day, we understand Jesus to mean spiritual food. The fact that he mentions both the flesh and the blood are strong indicators that Jesus meant for us to accept into ourselves the crucified, resurrected Christ.

What point is Jesus really making regarding the Bread of Life in this discourse that we have listened over the past few weeks? The answer is right on the page in today’s reading: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Jesus is telling us that we need to do more than just believe in him, we need to take him into our entire being.

Think about the completed quilt, the elaborate dinner served at Thanksgiving, the planted garden, the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle, finishing that large book, the commercial Christmas, the iPhone, anything that we create, perform, read or purchase that gives us earthly joy. These things are understandably important to us. But if that’s all we have, then every time one of those things has happened, it’s over. The only thing we can do to get that back is to repeat it. It’s not dissimilar to the mana from heaven, which had to be eaten every day, and eventually those who ate it died – there was nothing eternal about it. These things give nothing but day-to-day existence and do nothing for our eternal life.

But here we have a promise from Jesus that if we believe, trust, have faith in him, and we partake of the spiritual food that he offers, we will be assured

eternal life, not just in the future, but right now. One homilist that I read put it this way: “[T]here is a difference, a vast difference, between doing life and having life within us. Doing life or having life; that’s the issue Jesus is concerned about.”

Since I am willing to wager that most of us do not mention biohacking in our healthcare directive, I think we agree that Jesus’s path to eternal life is the way to go. All of this is fine, but as much as we believe it with all our hearts to be true, we seek to know how we can live so that Jesus becomes a part of us. Specifically, do we need to partake in the bread and the wine each week in order to fully accept Jesus into our being?

Some commentators I read believe that Jesus’ reference to flesh and blood refer to taking communion. But many others disagree. They maintain that in speaking about flesh and blood, Jesus is emphasizing the depth of the faith that we should have in him as the risen Christ. As a parish without a full-time priest right now, this is an important consideration for Trinity. Are we any less able to “identify with Jesus completely” because we don’t receive communion every week?

I personally think we are very fortunate right now. We are incredibly blessed to have Bishop Gordon and Pastor Hugh ministering to us two Sunday’s a month. Many people, including Bishop Gordon and Paster Hugh, work very hard to make that happen for us. We also have the opportunity hear from others amongst us who have dug deeply into scripture to share with you what we have found. For me to be able to do this is perhaps the greatest spiritual

gift I have ever received, and I receive it with the deepest gratitude to Jesus and this parish for the opportunity.

I want to spend my last few minutes this morning thinking about how we, as a parish without a priest every Sunday, continue to receive Jesus into our being. It's important to recognize that many churches around the world, and indeed in Connecticut, don't receive the Eucharist every Sunday. In some parts of the world, some don't receive the Eucharist at all. It is hard to think that those people haven't invited, and received, Christ into their being.

Many of us make it a point to be here every Sunday, even for morning prayer, where we read scripture and pray. We engage in bible study; we provide food and charity to our local neighbors and our international mission partners. I'm not saying this so that we can all pat ourselves on the back, but instead so that we can expand our thinking about what it means to have Jesus become a part of us, with and without the holy eucharist.

There is a different kind of joy here, something a bit more personal and lasting at this service. A type of joy that is not necessarily gone when it is over because we can, if we choose, continue to feed it throughout the week. Bishop Gordon shared with me the story of how, when he was Bishop of the Western Massachusetts diocese, he once did a workshop with laity asking them to list the most joyful parts of their experience at a service. He told me, as you would expect, that many took joy in every aspect of the Eucharist, including kneeling at the altar, kneeling when they got back to the pew, receiving the bread and the wine.

But many also talked about the music, which we are also very blessed to have with Kevin and with our very talented vocal singers. Many talked about their love of scripture, their passion for prayer, and their love of the Christian fellowship at coffee hour.

My ask for us today is to reflect on all that we have as we wait for the Holy Spirit to send us our new priest. I did this myself as I was preparing to speak today. When I am here, I feel spiritually and emotionally safe; I am among wonderful friends with whom I share a spiritual bond; and I have the freedom to pray and declare my love for Jesus without judgment. I learn more here most weeks on a single Sunday than I do all week away from here. I feel closest to Jesus here, where it is a right and joyful place to be. Think about the joy that comes to you just by being here vs. the “joy” that results from spending hours on Amazon and Facebook.

Now think about how you can extend that joy into your week through prayer and reading scripture and reflecting on all the wonderful stories you heard at coffee hour. And in the mission work we do to feed our neighbors, to educate and provide medical services to children in Nigeria, to help our veterans get the supplies they need, amongst many other wonderful projects.

As you reflect on all of that, recognize that these are joys that don't just disappear – all of this joy is the common mindset of everyone here. We are all receiving a type of joy here that permits us to make Jesus a part of our very being. This is the way to not just “do life”, but truly a way to “having a life within us.” We do indeed have much to be thankful for, much that enables Jesus to become part of our lives.

Let's close with a prayer:

Dear Lord, we are grateful that you are here with us every week, and indeed every day in our personal lives. As we live our lives enjoying all of life's joys that we encounter, we are grateful and blessed that you have offered eternal life to those who believe and are willing to abide in you so that you can abide in us. Please help all of us to remain open to welcoming you to be a part of us – to regularly pray and to read your good word. And Lord, may all those whom we encounter see the light of your love on our faces and in our hearts.

AMEN
