

Series Title: “John’s Gospel Perspective on the Good News”

16 August 2015: 12th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“Those Who Eat My Flesh . . .”—Preaching Text: John 6:51-58

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If you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality,
not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up.
Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be permissible, even cannibalism.

(Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*).

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We are in prayer for our community in light of the recent shootings – we pray for the family and friends who lost a loved one – we pray for our police department – we pray for our justice system as the facts are being searched for ...and for our community and nation in these difficult times of loss and discernment.

Our lesson today follows one of the “I am” (ego ami) saying of Jesus: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). These sayings tell us who Jesus is for the church and believers. Other examples of “I am” saying are Jesus announcing: “I am the true vine” (John 15:1-17) or “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). Many scholars and Bible readers note the relationship between Jesus speaking these words and God’s self-revelation of the divine name in the theophany (a visible manifestation of a deity) to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). We did a worship series a few years ago that considered the Gospel of John’s seven “I am” sayings in their canonical order. Today we consider the saying in chapter 6, verse 51 and following: ““I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” May we hear the lesson for the day?

51 “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”
52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

53 So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they

died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever” (John 6:51-58).

Have you ever thought about this question: “What does God have to do to make people happy?” In Exodus we hear the story of Israel being captive to Egypt and her Pharaoh. There the Israelites were slaves for about 400 years, but at just the right time Yahweh chose a reluctant Moses to cry out to Pharaoh: “Let my people go!”

Freedom from Egypt for Israel was never easy, but we guess that 3500 years ago the liberated people were thankful even so. I remember a Civil Rights maxim likely from Euripides that states: “I would rather die on my feet, than live on my knees.” But prior to Moses coming, the Israelites mostly mixed mortar and carried boulders to build Egypt’s pyramids. Thus we assume that the people were ecstatic to be freed from their servitude—but they were not. Their grumbling and complaining was world class! “Not enough food. Not enough water,” they moaned. We read in Exodus: “The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger’ ” (Exodus 16:3).

Perhaps what Israel needed was a whack in the side of the head or a kick in seat of the pants. Instead God gave them food and drink—manna from heaven and water from a rock—because it is God’s nature to offer generosity to his chosen people. It is all the more strange too after all the complaining and murmuring that the manna fed them for forty years.

As much as Israel looked like a collection of ingrates, later Jewish people remembered Yahweh’s manna as a sacred sign presented to Israel at its most vulnerable time. By this miracle they understood themselves as the people of God. And by this sacred sign that we could call the “miracle of the manna” we might assume that the manna made them happy. Yet, over time they tired of manna. They wanted to sit by the fleshpots of Egypt and eat their fill. Eat more and more, while forgetting their 16 hour works days making bricks for Pharaoh. Like many of us—

they wanted more. So here is the \$64,000 question: How much is enough? All the while we say:
MORE! BIGGER! BETTER! MORE!

In a certain biblical symmetry we see from John 6 connections to the “miracle of the manna” from Exodus. Jesus has just fed five thousand hungry people on the side of a mountain. Jesus did this with a few barley loaves and fishes—a youngster’s lunch. So we read here in John about another remarkable miracle! Yet . . . did that make the people happy? Honestly NO! Those gather seemed impressed with the feeding followed Jesus. Why? I would guess they followed him because they wanted **MORE! BIGGER! BETTER!** and **MORE!** They even asked him—which from our point of view seems almost like a taunt—“What then do you do for a sign, that we may see, and believe you?” (John 6:30).

What possible sign? Jesus had just fed five thousand mouths and more with nothing but a youngster’s brown-bag lunch. So now they ask what sign he is going to offer so they may believe. Preposterous! Yet all of us have worked with people—so maybe it is believable. Honestly we all know wonderful people out there—but no matter what you do, they want **MORE! BIGGER! BETTER!** and **MORE!**

So these formerly hungry people told Jesus what they wanted. They first suggested that Moses had given Israel manna in the wilderness—and Jesus might imitate that miracle—and then they might have faith in him. Of course, feeding 5000+ people was pretty great . . . and yet . . . it was only a slight multitude—and it was only one lunch. Moses fed Israel three meals a day for forty years! Why not match, that, Jesus—and then perhaps we will believe in you?! They knew that Jesus had done well with the feeding of the five thousand . . . but they wanted **MORE! BIGGER! BETTER! MORE!**

Often when we consider stories from the Bible we tend to think: “What senseless and inane people! Why can they not understand! They seem to never get it.” Honestly, however, are we

much better?

- God provides food for billions of souls every day. Despite this we still demand, “Offer me a sign, and then God—maybe—I’ll believe in you!”
- God gives us sustenance, clothing, housing—and so many material possessions that as Luke 12:18 puts it: “I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods”—and we still say, “Give me more, God! I have needs that you have neglected to maintain.” Too many of us think our car is too old—our houses are too slight—our jobs bore us—and so on and so on and so on. We say we appreciate what God has done, but it is simply never enough! Do MORE! BIGGER! BETTER! MORE!

So we return to our original question—“What does God have to do to make people happy?” Here is a clue from the gospel. The answer is not MORE—and for a very simple reason. When the answer is MORE, it will always be MORE.

- When the answer is MORE, no stuff will ever be enough!
- When the answer is MORE, it means that we binge and will never be satisfied!
- When the answer is MORE, there is nothing that will ever make us happy—no food—no house—no job—no car—no money—no adventure! NOTHING!
- When the answer is MORE, we will be content briefly—and then, like a pathetic addict, will begin our search for the next high!

The reason may be more sensible than we imagine. God created people for something MORE THAN MORE. God created us with place that cannot be fulfilled until it is bursting with GOD! God designed that space so that only God and the spirit can fill it. MORE cannot fill it! MORE just flows through. And we are left unfulfilled! Saint Augustine put it this way in his *Confessions*:
Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.

Jesus put it this way:

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you don’t have life in yourselves. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I in him (John 6:53-56).

“What does God have to do to make people happy?” Give us Godself! Without God, there is no joy! So God sent Jesus to fill that emptiness within. Jesus declares that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. He means by this saying two things:

- First, Jesus means that we must believe in him—accepting him—being willing to receive his love—and love him in return. When Jesus speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, he is talking about establishing a deep and abiding relationship. He is talking about filling that God-space—once and for all.
- And, then, Jesus means that we should eat the bread that he tells us is his flesh—and drink the wine that he tells us is his blood. He means that we should gather together as Christian folk to partake of the spiritual meal that has the capacity to fill us with himself. When we gather together around the Lord’s Table, we not only receive Christ, but our presence there witnesses to our faith and helps to strengthen the faith of others.

If you or I is trapped in the tyranny of MORE, then it sounds like nothing. But the truth is that MORE is an unending pit that we cannot fill. In a kind of divine irony bite of bread and sip of wine we receive at the Lord’s Table is the one and only meal that can fill us completely—that can satisfy us in our deepest reaches. I wish today was communion Sunday.