

Episcopal Church of the Resurrection
Centerville, Utah

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YEAR B, PROPER 15
Proverbs 9:1-6, Psalm 111, Ephesians 5:15-20, John 6:51-58

SOMETHING TO GNAW ON

I suspect that most of us, most of the time, see Jesus as the gentle preacher of love. He preaches peace, and he preaches love. And he ever so carefully nurtures us, his flock of fuzzy sheep. But the language and descriptions in today's gospel are jarring and they are graphic. If someone was unfamiliar with Jesus and this religious text, it would be downright macabre. It sounds like Jesus is demanding that his listeners be cannibals, devouring his flesh and drinking his blood. Even for Christians who know about Jesus, and the metaphor about being the bread of life, this text is coarse and explicit. And if you sense this rawness, this roughness in the text, that is intentional. In verse 53, when Jesus affirms that we must eat his flesh, the Greek word for eat is more properly translated as "to chew on" or "to gnaw on".

Of course God provides for us, cares for us, encourages us, and nurtures us. But we are not lifeless receptors of what God has given us, like sunflowers that passively soak up the sunshine. We have to do something. We have to make choices. Our life with God is an interactive one. But if we fail to respond to God, refusing to actively participate in the life that God has given us, it makes God's initiative rather worthless. Our lives are a sumptuous feast that God has prepared for us. He has prepared and served the food, and the table is set. But

it all goes to waste if we don't sit at the table and partake of the feast.

I suppose the benefit of today's graphic story is that the metaphor is so obvious. It is plain that Jesus is not trying to convert anyone to cannibalism. It is about bread and life. It is about what it means to really live, and what it takes to sustain a life that matters. The first important part of Jesus' lesson is that life, true, vibrant, fulfilling life, is much more than just routine existence. If life is just biology, about eating, sleeping and breathing, then Wonder bread from the corner store would be quite adequate. Strictly, biologically speaking, we can get along just fine in our lives without God. And indeed many millions of people live quite healthy lives apart from God.

But throughout our history, humankind has had this innate sense that there is something more. That we were meant to be more than a mere biological happenstance. That life was something meant to be more than just mere existence. And it is more than even our development of consciousness and reason. On top of that we sense that there must be a reason for our lives. We seek to have purpose in our lives. When we look at the miracle of human life, when we marvel at the awesome beauty of creation, when our souls are stirred by music and art, when our hearts exult in love and grieve in loss, surely there must be a point to it all. What a cosmic tragedy it would be, for all of this to be pointless.

So if living, true living, is more than just subsistence, more than mere existence, what is it? It involves looking beyond ourselves, and finding our place

within the majestic tapestry of creation. You know, there are some seven billion people alive on the earth now. And the estimates are that there have been some ninety billion people who have every lived. There is no getting around the fact that your life, and mine, is an incredibly small one out of ninety billion lives. It doesn't seem like much to work with. But here is where cosmic beauty comes in. No two of us are alike. We are unique, with unique lives and unique opportunities. You are the one sitting exactly where you are today. You have your own unique circle of friends and acquaintances. And no one is truly solitary. Your life is inextricably linked to at least several others. Whose lives are linked to others. Your life is a unique thread in this tapestry of creation. What you do matters, more than you will ever know. The ripples of your life not only spread out through the lives of others, but transcends time as coming generations inherit from previous generations.

We all too often forget how important our lives are. We may even think that our lives have no importance, or are worthless. Sometimes people, overcome by the trials of life, believe they can opt out. And I suppose you can surrender or retreat. But even a forsaken life, still affects the lives of others. Dying is one way to end your active participation in this life. But that may be the most significant act of all. With the end of your life, your opportunity to influence this grand tapestry of creation also ends. When we are born, what we are given is the opportunity to participate in the real game of life. With real, perpetual consequences. And when we die, our turn to play is over.

Sometimes, we do get a sense of our potential. We have these moments when we are aware that we can make a difference. That maybe there is a purpose to our lives. And sometimes that idea intimidates us. It is much safer to stay in the dark, and to go un-noticed. One of my favorite quotes is from Marianne Williamson's 1992 book, "Return to Love". I typed this quote on a little piece of paper about the size of a business card, and I carried it in my wallet. I wore two of them out before I quit carrying it. It is known as "Our Deepest Fear" and I'd like to share it with you this morning. Quote "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, or gorgeous, or talented, or fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, just as children do. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us, it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." End Quote.

The reason that Jesus is so explicit, is that he is trying to get our attention. Sure, we can choose to sleepwalk through life, just passing the time. But Jesus came to remind us, and to show us, the grander possibilities of our lives. We were not created just to subsist. Amidst the grandeur of all creation and the

expanse of the cosmos, God created humankind last. And with intentionality, with love, and with care, he made his children, you and I, the flower of all that He had created. It is natural to wonder, if we are that important to God. We are. In Hebrews, the apostle Paul writes; “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor.”

Jesus was asked, many times, who he was. In today’s gospel, he reveals that he is the bread of life. In the same way that bread from grain sustains our physical life, Jesus sustains the life that matters – our participation in the unfolding majesty of creation. Our call to be the sons and daughters of God. And in the same way as we take in food to feed our physical body, we must take in Jesus to feed our spiritual body. Just thinking about food will not satisfy your hunger. And just believing in God will not bring your life any closer to God. Jesus is the bread of true life. And if you want to be transformed, from a life of mere existence, to one as a child of God, you will need to be fed from the bread of heaven. And in so doing, we can get a foretaste of heaven.

In a few minutes, we will celebrate, once again, the Eucharist – the Great Thanksgiving. The Eucharist is the sacramental opportunity to do precisely what Christ says in today’s gospel. Partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist is a holy mystery. But a profound one. Taking Christ within you will transform you – forever. Jesus bids us all to come, to share in the heavenly banquet with God. To both live the lives of potential that we were created to

enjoy, and to live life eternal in the kingdom of God. Thanks be to God for his mercy, his grace, and his unending love for us! Amen.