“You Are What You Eat”
1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Pentecost XIII

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From the Pulpit
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A reading from the Gospel according to John, Chapter 6, verses 56-69.

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 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.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”
Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The Word of God for the people of God.  
*Thanks be to God.*

Are you hungry? Depends on how long the preacher goes, I guess. Depends on what’s on the menu after church. Depends on if you enjoyed the most important meal of the day before coming to church this morning. Are you hungry?

Different question…Do you know what it means to be *really* hungry?

People are hungry in the world today. In Ethiopia, where I have visited 5 times in the last 5 years, people are *really* hungry. Beggars ask for 1 Birr – saying quickly “one birr, one birr, one birr”, which is about a nickel. People are really hungry. Beggars also ask for empty water bottles. They call them ‘highlands’ because that was the first brand of bottled water in the nation. They say over and over “highland
highland highland” with hands outstretched to receive the prized donation of an *empty* water bottle, even. People are really hungry. Most Ethiopians can only afford to eat meat once a year – at the Ethiopian Orthodox holiday of Meskele in September that celebrates the legend of the discovery of the cross of Christ. Families will kill the fatted goat and feast together – but only once a year. People are really hungry.

And while there are most certainly varying degrees of poverty and hunger in different places and times, there are hungry people here in central Ohio too, even right now within blocks of this beautiful cathedral of justice and mercy. People are hungry. A September 2014 article in the Columbus Dispatch stated that Ohio rates among the worst states when it comes to hunger problems. The article reads…“Unemployment and low-wage jobs, food-stamp cuts and rising grocery costs are keeping thousands of Ohio families from escaping the Great Recession’s worst effects, advocates say…. The share of Ohio households reporting limited or uncertain ability to provide nutritious meals — the USDA’s definition of “food insecurity” — averaged 16 percent from 2011 to 2013. Ohio is among eight states whose rates remained significantly higher than the national average of 14.6 percent. The USDA says that measure reflects households where food intake was reduced and
“normal eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year due to limited resources.” Child-welfare and food-assistance organizations that held a forum on child hunger at the Riffe Center Downtown said the food-insecure data translate to more than 650,000 Ohio children. Stephanie Cihon, corporate director of Toledo-based ProMedica, said links between poor nutrition and problems such as obesity, diabetes, school performance and attendance problems are clear.”

People are hungry.

Today’s Gospel reading opens with a jarring statement from a scandalous miracle worker. But before we sink our teeth into today’s text, let’s be sure we know who is listening to Jesus and why.

Jesus had healed many people and had performed remarkable miracles and so crowds began to gather. And grow.

There were so many people pressing and pushing and positioning themselves to somehow be the beneficiary of the Rabbi’s strange new brew. But it was too much. It was overwhelming, as crowds can be, even to one so Divine. So
Jesus and his sea-faring companions hopped a ferry to wide open spaces. They needed a little breathing room. And the people followed them there. So Jesus and his outdoorsy students scaled a mountain to get a little elbow room. And the people followed them there.

And now, here they were, in the middle of nowhere, with a crowd of people they couldn’t shake. But there was a practical problem for the mystical teacher.

So Jesus asked one of his disciples a very simple question… Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?’

This is the question that starts the chain of events leading to the well-known miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. So the people ate and had their fill. But Jesus still didn’t have his space. So again he crossed the sea. So again the people followed him and his disciples.

For what? Why were they following him? For spiritual awakening? Enlightenment? Salvation from damnation? Deliverance from oppression?
Why were they following him? The entertainment value? The energy and excitement? Because he was an all-around good guy?

I think they were after a meal.

A meal is one of the most common ways that we experience community with one another. Peter Bolland, a philosopher and food blogger, said “Food is communion that erases all boundaries. When we gather around tables like spokes around a wheel, we draw each other into a sacred hoop that affirms us all in our humanity and deepens our awareness of the sacred nature of every breath, every word and every gesture. A chef is a shaman, a priest and an alchemist who uses fire to transform the base elements into the Elixir of Life. Cooking and eating binds us to ourselves, to each other, and to the sacred source from which all things come.” Food is how we connect. I have a friend – and maybe you have friends like this – when asked what he did this weekend, he will respond with the menu.

A meal is also a common way to celebrate. Ten years ago, I spent three weeks alone in a village in Ghana. After church one Sunday, I was invited to a party. There was so much food and we were drinking cold Coke out of glass bottles – a
real treat. There was a band that consisted of about 8 drummers and 1 trumpeter. The host of the party was dressed in a white gown. I thanked him for his invitation and asked him what the occasion was – why are we eating and drinking together? – why are we feasting and partying? – he said, ‘because I fell sick, but did not die.’ A meal is a common way to celebrate.

But not only connecting and celebrating, meals are the only way to get the calories we need to live. Meals at times are simply necessary because food and the fuel it gives are essential to life.

The crowds kept following Chef Jesus because they needed to connect, they needed to celebrate, they needed calories, in a word, they were after… food.

So after being followed for days – across the seas and over the mountains and through the woods – finally Jesus snaps at a hungry and cranky crowd… “Eat my flesh. Drink my blood.”
What?!? Eat flesh and drink blood?

The menu has changed from the grilled fish and barley cakes that first filled their hungry bellies. And we have to remember these words were spoken before 2,000 years of theological discourse and liturgical practice regarding Holy Communion, the bread and wine, the body and blood.

Eat flesh and drink blood.


Shocking. Shameful.

Eat flesh and drink blood.

Does this offend you? If so, that’s not my question, that’s Jesus’ question. Literally, just moments after he tells a hungry crowd to eat his flesh and drink his blood he asks them “Does this offend you?” They’re after calories and cannibalism is suggested. Does this offend you? Literally, he says “Does this scandalize you?” The Greek word is *scandalon*, where we get our English word… you guessed it… *scandal*. And who doesn’t salivate for a good scandal? It
moves magazines off the shelves and sells advertising for 24 hour news outlets.

The earliest Christians who worshiped in the catacombs of Rome were criticized by others for their secret meetings and bizarre rituals, rumored to include cannibalism, incest, and infanticide. These charges were common enough that numerous second century writers felt constrained to refute them. This is scandalous.

Eat my flesh? Drink my blood? Why would we do that? For community, like the food blogger says? For celebration, like my host in Ghana? For calories like the sea-crossing, mountain-climbing crowd?

No. No, we eat flesh and drink blood in order to… abide. Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” To a people seeking and searching, climbing and crowding, Jesus says, abide.

In other words, stay put. To abide means to stay in place and stay in time. To a crowd on the move with hunger pains growing stronger by the minute, stay put… to faithful Jews living under crushing political, economic, and religious oppression, stay put… to twenty-first century Americans
who can’t stop going going going and can’t spare a minute, stay put. Abide.

The Savior’s scandalous statement is actually a most intimate invitation: an invitation to stay put, be present, be here right now. Abide. Don’t look around, just look right here. Abide.

We are a people who need this invitation, who resonate with this request.

This year’s Grammy Award winning Song of the Year is a ballad about abiding. Sam Smith serenades us with the words “stay with me” and we feel what he’s feeling.

A cult classic, and I must admit without shame, my favorite movie, has a character who refers to himself as The Dude who lives by the mantra, “The Dude Abides.” And we root for him to do so. And he does. The Dude Abides.

We feel it deep down. We’re hungry for it. We need to… be here… right now. We need to stay put – in time – and in place. We need to abide.
It’s no surprise then, that one of the most beloved hymns in Christendom is Abide With Me, written by the Scottish poet Henry Francis Lyte in the middle of the 19th century and most often sung to William Henry Monk’s beloved tune Eventide. It was King George’s and Mahatma Gandhi’s favorite hymn. Survivors of the Titanic reported that it was the hymn the band was playing as the ship went under. Not only do we sing it in congregations all over the world every week, but Thelonious Monk, Doris Day, and Elton John have recorded it too. English soccer fans sing it before matches.

As a culture, as a people, we must be hungry to abide. It is the cry of our collective conscious.

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Abide with me. Why is this sentiment so universal, so familiar, so meaningful?
Calories metabolize and hunger returns. Entertainment ends and boredom returns. Tricks, tips, and techniques to make life easier and better change, fade, and become passé. Skills become obsolete. Money and real estate lose value. Expectations fail. Plans go awry – even the best-laid ones. This leaves us hungry and hangry.

Like the crowds that wouldn’t let Jesus get away, we’re all crossing that stormy sea, we’re all climbing that high mountain. We’re all after a meal. But, as it turns out, we’re not after calories. We’re after presence.

A still-speaking, all-loving God hears our hungry hearts, hears our stomachs growling and invites us to stay put in the peaceful presence of the Divine. And Jesus, always looking to stir the pot, seasons the holy invitation the flavor of a delicious scandal when he says, basically, “you are what you eat.”

You are what you eat. This is an interesting phrase. It has been used by nutritionists and marketers to either get us to eat healthy or to buy their products.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, who has been credited with founding the genre of the gastronomic essay two hundred
years ago, wrote, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are”. Fifty years later, the Marxist German philosopher, Feuerbach, said in his essay, The Essence of Christianity, that “Man is what he eats.” He was attempting to argue that because, in his view, there is no God, what you see is what you get, therefore we are just a collection of calories and cells and nothing more.

I think Brillat-Savarin and Feuerbach are right. You are what you eat. But I think they are wrong about the meal. They see just calories: flesh and blood, fruits, vegetables, and grains.

But the meal that we enjoy when God invites us to abide gives us community, cause to celebrate, and a deeply intimate connection with God, others, all creation, and ourselves. Through the meal of God’s peace and love… we know who we are, we know what we’re made of, and we know where and when to abide, that is, we know what time and space to stay put in. We belong in the time and space of a loving and peaceful God.
The famous hymn continues…

I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter’s pow’r?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

So… what’s for dinner?

Amen.

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