

Sermon Notes August 16, 2015

I am the bread of life, my flesh is true flesh, my blood is true drink, eat of my flesh, drink of my blood...These words and phrases are by now a familiar trope. We are in the fourth but not final week where the Gospel reading from John is about the subject matter of eating and drinking the body of Christ in one form or another.

We will hear more from John about the connection of eating bread and drinking wine until the end of this Gospel. The metaphor of bread and wine, body and blood, eat/drink will be more directly connected to the Last Supper and Eucharist later on in John. Yes, there is foreshadowing of the connection to the Eucharist here but we are not yet at that point in Jesus' ministry—the point where his disciples are directed to the end of his ministry and what life will be like when he is gone. We are not yet at the, “take eat, this is my body broken for you, do this in remembrance of me.”

Where I am on this Sunday when I read this Gospel directs me to think of the eating/drinking metaphor in a different way, yes he mentions to “eat of the bread of life” which is his flesh and drink of the water of life, as represented by his blood.

But for now, here in Chapter 6, the metaphor, for me, speaks to the present, our present. This verse today is about the acceptance of Jesus for earthly purposes. Accepting or better yet ingesting Jesus in the present will yield a flow of goodness now, on through eternity. Live the heavenly life now, eat of the heavenly banquet that will sustain you in the Kingdom of the World.

Jesus certainly got the attention of the Jews when he talked about drinking his blood in these verses. The very concept of eating flesh uncooked and drinking blood ran counter to the dietary demands of the Jewish people. The Book of Leviticus, from the Hebrew Scriptures, is filled with lists of restrictions. Such prohibitions of eating and drinking blood can be found in Leviticus 7:26.

There is shock value in this metaphor used by Jesus and he knows it. I think the metaphor of eating and drinking has lost perhaps some of its impact in our world

today. For many food and clean drinking water, is easily accessible and cheap—depending what you go in for. The comparison to the life sustaining qualities of food and drink are still readily understood but perhaps a little more remote these days.

Today I want to substitute the flesh and blood metaphor with just one word, and that is “Love.” I think Jesus is really talking about the love message he brought. We are to feed on that love, we are to accept it, live it, as it becomes a part of our being. Let me substitute the word love into a part of the reading today. Jesus said, “I am the living love that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this love will live forever; and the love that I will give for the life of the world is my love. So I changed the metaphor a little, but I think it works. This literary device is fungible.

A metaphor is an interesting tool to use in exploring our faith. The metaphor clearly is something Jesus utilizes to share his message to others during his ministry.

So what is a metaphor? To review, because it helps me, is a literary device, a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. A thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract. A metaphor can be static but here and elsewhere in the Scriptures where metaphors are used (such as, “I am the light,” “I’m the Good Shepherd,” and “I am the Alpha and the Omega...”) they typically have layers of meaning. Layers of meaning that often have a way of meeting us where we are at the moment of contact.

It was through my experience while serving as a hospital chaplain last year in Hartford that I became more comfortable with metaphors as a means of theological reflection and as a tool in providing pastoral care.

My initial response to looking for and using metaphors was at first one of moderate skepticism. My introduction to using this tool, whether in helping patients explore the nature of their illness or in the search for a connection to the Divine started when one of my colleagues was confronted by our Clinical Pastoral

Education supervisor about how a metaphor might help illuminate an interaction she had with a Pt of hers that was dying.

I think the metaphor identified had something to do with the making of pasta sauce; the Pt was a chef before becoming ill. He enjoyed the process of cooking, especially S. Italian classics. The metaphor of his preparing a sauce, as he had described to her in detail might, according to our supervisor be used to help make necessary connections in his waning days. I audibly groaned when I heard this. Are you kidding? People buy this? I was skeptical if not a little cynical about such approaches. I was not alone but I made the most audible groan. I thought it seemed more than a little forced, it was ham-fisted. I challenged my supervisor on this. It was a slow morning and I needed some sport. But ultimately, in the spirit of the challenge, he put it back to me to try it out during my next 36 hour hospital overnight. I agreed but with some reticence.

Sometime between motorcycle accidents and gunshot victims I made my rounds through the hospital and visited one of the step-down units. I visited a Pt who was struggling with what his future had in store, in light of his recent diagnosis and treatment. As a part of his treatment he would leave the hospital having an ostomy bag for the near term. He was struggling with work, having lost his means of income because of his illness. He recently became single, he struggled with what dating and relationships would be like with a bag. He worried about how he could look after his daughter...he had many real and distressing realities to sort through. He was depressed to the point of hopelessness.

In the course of a long conversation I came across a passion of his. Restoring old cars. He shared how he reclaimed a car that sat abandoned in a field while in high school and began to bring this beat-up, discarded muscle-car back to life. It brought him joy to share this story and brought a big wide smile to his face. There was excitement and hope in his words.

With my marching orders and an obvious opportunity, I carefully shared back with the Pt. what I heard him talk about and what I observed in him. At some point I said to him, "you sound very much like this car you restored in high school. Perhaps you are that car you restored in the 1970's, it was broken down, it was

abandoned, it cried out for love and attention, and you heard it. You did something about it.” I told him that I was in awe of his story and his gift. I suggested that perhaps he hold on to this metaphor during these dark and stormy moments—that there was hope for him. There were people, including his daughter that loved him and cared about him. This was not an end but the start of a process, a difficult one but hope was present. There is more, and time erodes some of the nuances here, but he was left for a moment with a personal metaphor to grip on to.

I left having learned something about myself and later shared this interaction, in the form of a verbatim with my colleagues. I think the Gospel today, offers us the message of hope in this invitation to consume the love brought by Christ. If we accept God’s love, we will have God’s love shine forth from us.

When times are difficult for you, have you found help in looking for a metaphor to make sense out of what is going on in your world? I have done it. Only a few months after this Pt interaction, I began my project of building a wood/canvas canoe, an Old Town design from the 1940’s. This project became my personal metaphor for a spell, a very concrete metaphor for a moment in my life. Like the metaphor in the Gospel it was a metaphor that changed over time for me.

It became my metaphorical means to paddle out of a deeply damaged relationship and through the stormy seas of a confusing and frustrating ordination process; it was my metaphorical means to a future unknown. Once in the boat there was safety and security in it. The canoe was about fighting my way upstream, it was about shooting rapids, it was at times about being up the creek without a paddle, stormy seas, cutting through a placid lake with soft trailing ripples to a place of peace.

It was also about engaging in a high school senior project deferred from my youth. It was a source of nostalgia for a childhood filled canoeing adventures—it reconnected me with a buddy from college that I lived near, giving us time for fellowship when he would join me from time to time to build. Upon completion, the canoe became a gift to my brother in celebration of his birthday. Great joy I

had paddling about the Farmington River with him. Practically speaking, my building project, my metaphor informed all these things.

I became a reluctant believer in the metaphor as means to explore not only a patient's spirituality but my own being. And yes, I did acknowledge and thank my supervisor for his insistence of its use, although I still gave him grief from time to time about it.

With this said, we do things in life for many reasons. The stories, parables, and metaphors of Jesus are ever so simple but ever so complex and can speak to us in different ways in our varied journeys.

I have spent a bit of time this morning placing myself in the center but at the center of the Scripture reading we have our Savior making the point clear in his literary device and made multiple times in the Gospel of John of what is important. It is internalizing this metaphor of bread or love, if that is better for you. The message can be about the Eucharist, just as building a canoe can be just about its practical use in getting exercise, but we have oh-so-many opportunities to think broadly about the meaning and importance of the Sacramental language found in this Gospel lesson.

What I have enjoyed this week has been the exercise of exploring this text in how it speaks to me. Much of the learning that comes from reading the text is in making a connection to it, making it your own. Perhaps our understanding keeps us right smack in the middle of the path but I think there are real and valuable lessons to be learned when our thoughts take us off road, off the well maintained road of life.

Amen