

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Today is week four of what I'm calling our five-week summer school course on Jesus as the bread of life. Today is really the high point and culmination of Jesus' teaching on this. Next week's text deals with the collateral damage his teaching causes. And that's because what Jesus has to say here is so shocking and provocative when taken at face value, that it costs him many of his followers. But we'll put a pin in that, as they say, and come back to it in due course. This week we have to do the hard work of facing up to this difficult teaching.

I recently found out that the presenter at our synod's fall theological conference this year will be retired Lutheran seminary professor, Mark Alan Powel. I'm a fan, and am looking forward to that. His field is biblical studies, and one of the most memorable things I've gotten from him is his answer to someone asking him whether he takes the Bible literally or not. This is his answer: "In the places where it's meant to be taken literally, I take it literally. In the places it's not meant to be taken literally, I don't." It's a great answer because it immediately reveals a basic problem with the question, namely its assumption that the Bible is simple and uniform, and that there is a straightforward way of approaching it. Today's reading from John chapter six might add a further possibility to that answer: in some places, the Bible is meant to be taken both literally and not literally at the same time. That's probably not where you thought I was going with this. You were hoping that I was going to say that this is one of those places where it's not meant to be taken literally. Because, how could you take it literally? We're right there with the Judeans who ask, "how can this man give us his flesh to eat?" And in spite of Jesus's graphic language, the text does not go on to tell us about Jesus carving off pieces of his flesh and handing them out like the loaves and fishes. So how can this be *anything* but figurative speech?

Before I try to answer that, let's have a look at what *is* clearly figurative speech in our first reading from Proverbs. The lectionary only gave us the first six verses of this reading, but in talking about this with my text study group on Tuesday, I decided to give us the entire chapter here so we can get the bigger picture of what those first verses mean. It's easy to see how those verses, standing on their own, connect to Jesus' message in our Gospel reading. Wisdom is personified as a woman who puts on a feast. The one who partakes of this feast will live. A lovely image. It makes you want to dig into some wisdom! And it sounds rather like Jesus talking about the bread of life, doesn't it? But if we stop there, we risk making it seem like that is an achievable goal, something we might choose to do. The text, though, goes on in the next verses to show that it is far from easy to choose the good. First, sharing wisdom with those who don't want it (the text calls them scoffers) will get you abused. It will get you hurt, and hated. Second, it's not always easy to know whom we should listen to. Notice that the foolish woman in the last section of this expanded reading uses exactly the same invitation as Wisdom in the first section. "You who are simple, turn in here!" Eating at one feast leads to life. Eating at the other lands you in Sheol, the place of the dead. But the ones who eat at the foolish feast don't know that it is deadly. What are being presented here in the entirety of this chapter of Proverbs are significant alternatives with real consequence. It's literally a matter of life and death. But where is there hope for simple folks? How are those "who have no sense," who are not yet wise, to choose the right meal? "Laying aside immaturity" sounds good. But then, so does the sweet stolen water of the second feast, and the bread eaten in secret. And isn't that an allusion to the desirable fruit eaten in secret by the first man and woman in the garden?

I think this helps set the stage for John chapter six, and think that it is entirely possible, and even likely, that John's early church community would have thought of Wisdom's feast and of her bread and wine when confronted with this passage where Jesus speaks of himself first as bread and then slides into talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. And, as I said a few weeks ago, they would also most certainly have made the connection to the celebration of Holy Communion in their weekly gatherings. Some biblical scholars even think that the words Jesus uses here in John six might have been the words used in their communion liturgy. In other words, instead of, or maybe in addition to, Jesus' familiar words that we use in Communion from the other Gospels, "this is my body, given for you," "this cup is the new covenant in my blood," they might have heard the words, "my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink" and "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

Here is where the literal reading comes in. And here is the answer to that question in the reading that we so resonated with: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Here's how: right here in the celebration of Holy Communion, *that's* how. But, that's symbolic, right? I mean *clearly* that little wafer isn't flesh and that shot of white wine or red grape juice isn't blood. Not so fast, said Luther. There is a promise here that we need to take seriously. That promise gets attached somehow to these ordinary physical elements so that it is what it promises. This *is* Jesus Christ *for you*, and not just in some theoretical or abstract sense. This is the Word of God that was with God in the beginning, who is God, who has now become flesh and lives among us. The Greek word "among" there can also be translated "in." So the word has become flesh and lives in us, his flesh taken into our flesh. This is God truly for us in the most real and intimate way we can imagine.

And why is that good news? Because if Jesus is only a teacher's voice from the past, or only a present spiritual word outside of ourselves, a voice that leads and guides, maybe cajoles and pushes us toward living the life we were created for, and if responding to that voice is ultimately up to us, then we are lost. Because God knows we continually fail at heeding that voice. Left to our own devices we might have our good days when we make good choices. But we also have more than our share of bad days, and hours and minutes, when we don't, when we *know* good from evil and right from wrong but *choose* the evil and the wrong despite our best intentions.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood," Jesus promises, "abide in me, and I in them." God has come in Jesus Christ to dwell among and in us, deep in the flesh, deep in our daily earthly reality. Reborn in the waters of baptism and fed with God's very self, we are continually in the presence of God, held and supported in times of trouble, welcomed and reconciled on those bad days and moments of our unfaithfulness, and encouraged and embraced on those good days and moments of selfless love and joy.

The excerpt from the letter to the Ephesians that we have as our second reading is a good place to wrap things up this morning. It is encouragement for us to hold on to the one who holds us, to be wise and not foolish, to be responsible and grateful, and to sing! And that's just what we're going to do now. For that past few weeks in talking about Holy Communion in my sermons I have been quoting the words "we become what we receive." You might have noticed similar words in our offering prayer. Now we finally get to sing those words in the final stanza of our next hymn, which has become one of my favorite communion hymns. We who abide in Jesus Christ the bread of life ourselves become bread, blessed and broken for the life of the world. May we live out that promise of who we are. And may the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.