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John 6:51-58
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You Want Me to Eat What???

From time to time, all of us have been guilty of taking some things for granted, simply because they have become familiar to us.

Take, for instance, the ancient and honorable game of golf. I think most of us understand the basic principles of golf.

Some of us play golf. Many more of us play at it. Some of us have given up completely – me!

But suppose you had to explain golf to someone who had never seen it before -- say an Aborigine from the Australian outback.

Don't you think an Aborigine from the Australian outback might find our game of golf rather strange?

"Why is that big man trying to punish that little ball by hitting it with that long stick?" he might ask.

"He's not trying to punish the ball," you explain. "He's trying to drive it. He wants to put the little white ball in the tiny hole way over there, about 350 yards away."

"Why not just walk over and drop the ball in by hand? It would be a whole lot easier. Trying to hit such a small ball with such a long stick seems like a waste of time."

"Well," you respond, "that's part of the challenge. Nobody wants to put the ball in the hole the easy way."

“In fact, we pay an expert a lot of money to make sure the ground around the hole is especially tricky.

“See the woods over there, and the rough grass and the small lake and the sand traps? Those are all places where the little white ball can get caught or lost.”

“Oh, now I get it!” says your friendly Aboriginal visitor. “If it takes a long time to put the ball in the hole, everyone is happy.”

You shake your head. “No, if it takes a long time to put the ball in the hole, someone usually gets angry.

“See that man over there, throwing his clubs around and cursing? He’s furious because he just hit his ball into the lake for the third time!”

“Then, tell me,” your friend asks, with a puzzled look, “why does he bother to play golf at all, if it only makes him angry?”

To which you respond, “That man comes here twice a week to play so he can relax!”

And so it goes. Truth is, familiar things, like golf, that we take for granted, can seem strange to others.

At the end of the first century, in the time of the early Church, in the days when the Gospel of John was written, around 100 A.D., the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper seemed strange to many, even controversial.

The scripture lesson that I just read from John, chapter six, reflect the strangeness some found in the idea of the Lord’s Supper.

Taking Christ's body and blood into ourselves?

Many of the Jews and Gentiles in the first century rejected that idea outright.

And, John's passage indicates that even some of Jesus' disciples found the teaching difficult to accept. They thought it wasn't just plain strange, but barbaric.

And today, if we are honest, some of us are no different.

Let me ask you, as you listened to the choir's anthem and to the scripture texts we read, didn't parts of it make you just a bit squeamish?

Were any of you thinking, "I don't know about this *eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood* stuff. It sounds way too strange for me. It makes me very uncomfortable.

"It makes me think of cannibals and zombies! I know that's strange to say in a service of worship, but really that type of language really throws me off.

"I would just as soon skip over it and think about something else. You know, think about something like majestic mountains, crashing seas, wonderful sunsets. Those are things that capture my interest."

Anyone???

When we read John's gospel, what we most often notice is that he is especially good at the serene stuff that expresses the intimate relationship between Jesus and those who believe in him.

John gives us many of the most familiar expressions of this relationship: Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep. He is the vine and we are the branches. He abides in God and we abide in him.

And yet, as our text today reveals, he is still very big on the whole eat my flesh and drink my blood kind of thing even though John's Gospel is the only one of the four gospels that does not include an account of the Last Supper.

In chapter six, Jesus starts out innocently enough, speaking of himself as "the bread of life" that has "come down from heaven" and invites his hearers to partake of this bread--that is, to believe in him. It is a palpable image and an evocative one.

But then, in the 51st verse, the image turns and begins to sound rather gruesome.

Jesus says, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Jews then ask the obvious question: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Now, I'm guessing they responded in that way to give Jesus a chance to explain himself. "He must have misspoken. Surely Jesus meant to say something else."

After all, to eat someone's flesh only appears in the Old Testament as a metaphor for great hostility. And the drinking of blood was considered an abomination, forbidden by God's law.

So they ask for clarification. But Jesus responds by repeating the image and in still more explicit terms.

He says, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

You don't just have to be a good Jew to want to avert your eyes from such an image and cover your ears at such language.

It does sound like cannibalism. It kind of reminds me of two of my guilty pleasures – the TV shows “The Walking Dead” and its spinoff “Fear the Walking Dead.”

And I have to be honest, taken in a literal sense – it is pretty disgusting, and I can see why the Jews and Gentiles of his day, and many people around the world today don't get it.

But that's the problem, if we believe that we have to take the bible and all that Jesus says literally.

I think we need to remember that first and foremost, at its core, the Lord's Supper is a mystery and certainly not in any way cannibalism!

Many attempts have been made to explain this mystery over the years. The early church simply affirmed that the risen Christ was with them at their celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

But then, beginning in the Middle Ages, laborious attempts were made to explain how and when Christ was present in the sacrament.

It was during this period that theories such as "transubstantiation" were developed.

Transubstantiation is the belief that somehow the very substance of the bread and wine is transformed into the substance of the flesh and blood of Christ, even though the outward appearance of the bread and wine remain unchanged.

The medieval church began to affirm that when the priest lifts the bread and says, "Hoc est corpus meum" (which is Latin for, "This is my body"), the bread is miraculously transformed into the physical presence of Christ.

Protestant reformers, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, while affirming Christ's presence at the church's celebrations of the sacrament, were disturbed by such interpretations.

To them, such interpretations reduced the sacrament to a form of sacred magic.

I think it is telling that the phrase *Hoc est corpus* was later transformed into the familiar magician's incantation "hocus-pocus."

The truth is, Christ's presence is real in this sacrament, but the manner and means of that presence is a mystery.

Of course, the ways in which Christ is present at this meal are not mysteries in the same way that a magician's pulling a rabbit out of a hat is mysterious.

If we were to examine a magician's hat and insist that he repeat the act again without his cape, then we might very well understand how the feat was accomplished.

But the mystery that is present at Christ's table is forever beyond the reach of explanation. And that, actually, is comforting to me.

It is more like the mystery of love. Where does it come from? How is it sustained? How does it sustain us?

We will never fully know, but the power is no less real because of our inability to explain it, right?

It is nothing less than the mystery and the power of Jesus made real and made available to us.

You know, occasionally, I will hear someone say that children should not receive communion until they fully understand what it means.

While I certainly understand why they might say that, I also think, "At what age is that? Who can claim to fully understand all that the sacrament means?"

The afore mentioned John Calvin, after a long dissertation on the sacrament, summarized his understanding of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper by saying, "I would rather experience it than understand it."

Indeed, we are invited, through the sacrament of communion, to experience the Lord's Supper through all five of our senses.

Communion is God trying to communicate with us in ways that are deeper than words. Every part of us can be engaged when we receive the Lord's Supper.

We hear the Words of Institution as they are spoken. We hear the clank of the communion vessels as they are handled.

We smell the unfermented wine as we lift the cup to our lips.

We touch ... we feel the spongy softness of the bread cube between our fingers; we feel the lightness of the cup.

We taste the bread and juice.

We see the sunlight reflected off the silver in the communion trays.

In Communion, God is attempting to reach us on the most fundamental level.

You see, we take Christ into ourselves not only through taste, but through our eyes, through our ears, through our senses of touch and smell.

Communion is God reaching out to us in every way that God possibly can.

Maurice Sendak's most popular children's book is, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

In this book a little boy is sent to his room without dinner. He has misbehaved of course.

An adventure ensues upon entry to his room. He travels to a place where the wild things are.

Hideous creatures, wild things of great size, greet him with roars, fierce eyes and sharp teeth.

But being a wild thing himself (as his mother has accused), he takes no pause and quickly becomes their king.

Great havoc is raised at his request and treacherous delight abounds!

But in time he longs to be “where someone loved him best of all.” And so he returns, bidding the Wild Things goodbye.

In his room he finds his supper waiting for him. And with great delight the narrator informs the reader that the little boy found his supper still warm.

This is a simple tale that can stir the wild thing inside of all of us, particularly little boys.

One such little boy wrote to Mr. Sendak and Mr. Sendak recollects:

A little boy sent me a charming card with a little drawing on it. I loved it. While, I answer all my children's letters - sometimes very hastily - but this one I lingered over.

I sent him a card and I drew a picture of a Wild Thing on it. I told him I loved his card.

Sometime later, I got a letter back from his mother and she said: 'Jim loved your card so much ... he ate it.'

That to me was one of the highest compliments I've ever received. He didn't care that it was an original Maurice Sendak drawing or anything.

He saw it, he loved it, he ate it.

That interaction is a simple way of understanding the Lord's table. In the act of breaking bread and drinking from the cup, Christians hear what Christ did for them, they love it, and they eat it.

Just as the little boy returned home to the place "where someone loved him best," Christ invites all to return from wild ventures of the week, treacherous delights, and numerous missteps to a place where we are loved best.

And when we return from great havoc raised, we too find our dinner in our room and it is still warm.

How is Christ present in our sacramental meal?

We cannot fully know. Such close love is always a mystery.

But his presence is no less real for all of our inability to explain it.

What we can do is seek the mysterious blessings of the table and receive the palpable gifts of a palpable God.

For all who receive the presence of Christ, John's affirmation is good news, indeed:

For the saying is true: You are what you eat.

May we each find the presence of God in the entire experience of our Communion Service this morning.

And may it sustain us and fill us, and maybe even change us as we prepare for the week ahead.

Amen!