

If you were reading from a piece of paper and the only thing on the paper in front of you was a picture of a loaf of bread (or some image of grain), a bundle of grapes (or a chalice), a body, a red drop of liquid, and a blue drop of liquid, how would you read it?

It sort of reminds me of the font available for typing in Microsoft Word called “webdings”. To encounter a paper with nothing but images on it can leave room for quite a bit of interpretation and wiggle room. Does this image mean this and what about this one? And what about if you combine the images? Does putting them together suggest anything?

What we can know now from Jesus’ teachings is that Jesus uses the familiar symbols of bread, wine, flesh, blood, and water to teach about the gift of life. Each of those images on the piece of paper contribute to the way a Christian might define life, and not just any life, but eternal life. In defining eternal life, we are not talking about immortality, but a way of living in the light and not the darkness, in righteousness and not evil, in hope and not fear, filled by the bread of life, quenched by the cup of salvation, freed by sacrifice, saved by the blood, and renewed by the waters of creation.

One of the underlying things we can learn from this is that Jesus’ teachings are not always straight forward. Often, he uses symbols to connect people to the divine truths of life. In Jesus’ day, the use of symbols and metaphors in teaching were used to identify a person’s convictions and beliefs. It was necessary to use the symbols and teach metaphorically because if the authorities saw or heard of anything that threatened the ruler or king of that time (and we know Jesus was just that in every way), the penalty was often death. Not only were the symbols marking religious belief and metaphors sharing values, but they were also necessarily preserving life to give opportunity for the divine truths to be shared and believed in. Using symbols and metaphors allowed Jesus to get at the heart of meaning, which is not always a place people look. It is a lot easier to define something by its outer layer or surface, and unfortunately that is where we often stop.

Another one of the underlying things we can learn from this is that Jesus’ teachings are not always easy to understand and apply. Something so necessary and essential you would hope would be straight forward and easy to grasp. But sometimes, at least I think, the symbols and teachings Jesus used can be really difficult to swallow. Such as this teaching we encounter today, when Jesus says we must eat of his flesh and drink of his blood. What? This is challenging because it is hard teaching. Even the people and disciples listening to Jesus teach for the first time acknowledge how challenging his teachings are.

Why are they challenging? I think they are challenging because they call for us to use every sense God has given us: from the most obvious (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching) to the sometimes untapped (motivation, critical thinking, trusting, faith). Jesus' teachings are challenging because, like the great commandment, which commands us to "Love the Lord our God with ALL our heart, soul, mind, and ability, and love our neighbor as ourselves," they call us to dig deep and go beyond the surface of belief, from simply seeing and hearing to owning and embodying. As we read a moment ago, not everyone wants to be challenged. And as the church seeking to come together, share the good news of God with everyone we can, and experience the true embodiment of Christ's divine character, the fact that not everyone wants to dig deep, even if it is what is needed for true life, presents its own challenge. The good news is that with challenge comes opportunity. Opportunity for what? In this case, it is opportunity to experience God firsthand, live in right relationship with God, and embody the power and strength God gives us to be the church.

With the foundation that Jesus' teachings and stories are not always straight forward and can be quite challenging, what tools can we use to capture the essence of Jesus' teaching for today?

There is one tool, or spiritual practice, I would like to focus on today, but before we get there, I want to touch on a few important notes of this text.

1. As is common of dialogues in John, those who hear Jesus' teaching don't get it. We read that they dispute, literally fight, with one another over the question, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" I will say I think it is good news that cannibalism was no less offensive in that day than in our own. To Jews it was unthinkable to drink animal blood, a capital crime according to the law expressed in Leviticus 17:12-14. Therefore, how much more scandalous to drink human blood.
2. This story does not allow us to forget how strange the message of Christian faith really can be. Eat his flesh? Drink his blood? With just a few words Jesus manages to offend other Jews and alienate everyone else. He gathers great crowds around him but little by little, as they listen to his teachings, the people turn away until only a few of his closest disciples remain.
3. As we look beyond the surface, the language of flesh and blood emphasizes embodiment. Flesh and spirit belong together according to God's intended plan for creation, and only by their union is true (eternal) life possible. It is in Jesus Christ that we encounter the flesh and spirit working together for the fulfillment of God's will. But, as John points out, the unity of flesh and spirit is not that easy to do. John doesn't leave the problem alone though. John points to a solution.

Imagine for a moment being one of the disciples. You have now been offered this great gift. You have been yearning for true life and you are at the doorstep. Aren't you going to embrace Jesus, "the way, the truth, and the life," and walk through the door? The disciples with Jesus froze. Many of them complained that Jesus' teachings were just too difficult. The very thing they yearned for is being offered them, and still, they turn away from it. Why? Why on earth would some of the disciples walk away from the chance to abide with God, to dwell in Jesus, and have Jesus dwell in them? As we imagine ourselves as one of the disciples, we are to ask, "Are we any different?"

As a way of dissecting and better understanding the teachings from Jesus in John 6, so that we can effectively apply them to our lives, I would like us to consider a spiritual practice. The spiritual practice is known as "incarnational abiding." To define this practice, we need to break it down.

We know what incarnational is. It is "God with us", here and now, present in the substance of this life. The Christian belief in Jesus as the Christ is based on the principle of incarnation, the divine indwelling among the human. Last week I mentioned that Jesus' declaration and our celebration of Jesus as "The bread of life" is an example of spiritual incarnation.

And we know what abiding is. Abiding means to remain with. The most common reference used for abiding is John 15 when Jesus declares, "I am the vine and you are the branches... abide with me." We encounter the invitation from Christ to abide with him, remain connected with him, establish our roots in him, 12 times in that story alone. To abide with Christ is to be at home with him, just as Christ is at home with God. God abides in us because first and foremost we abide in God; the point is communion with God. Being and abiding in Christ, we look for Christ's ongoing, active ministry among us and the exciting adventure of participating in that action wherever it happens!

The spiritual practice of "incarnational abiding" then, combining the two together, is the practice of uniting our flesh and spirit as one.

What does incarnational abiding look like?

The most immediate example is to consider Simon Peter and his response to Jesus when asked if he too wishes to go away. "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." Despite the startling images, despite the hard path, Simon Peter declares that he is ready to give up some control in order to accept the gift of true life. Peter knew what he had found.

Surely there were many places Peter and his friends could have turned right? There were likely business prospects, family commitments, the comforts of home, the search for social status. There is always another dollar to be earned, another purchase to be made, another relationship to explore, another position to pursue, another enemy to withstand, another grief to mourn, or another country to explore. Simon Peter came to recognize amid all this, that Jesus was the Holy One of God, who alone possessed the words of eternal life.

Another example is putting on the armor of God. Ephesians 6:10-20 outlines being strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. To be strong and have strength we are to put on the whole armor of God. Doing so empowers us to stand against the wiles of the devil, against rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of present darkness, and spiritual forces of evil. Just as we put clothes on to cover our flesh, God wants us to abide in the Spirit and Truth of God to stand up, stand tall, and withstand the evil powers of the flesh.

- Fasten the belt of TRUTH around your waist!
- Put on the breastplate of RIGHTEOUSNESS!
- As shoes, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of PEACE!
- Take the shield of FAITH!
- Take the helmet of SALVATION!
- Take the sword of the Spirit, the WORD of God!
- PRAY!

This kingdom story worth retelling is not intended to reinforce our complacency or discourage us from witnessing the good news of Jesus to others. What it does do is remind us that our calling, however strange and difficult, is more than skin deep. Our calling to spirit and life reaches beneath the surface of our lives and into our workplaces, bank accounts, family relationships, eating habits, opportunities to play, sports fields and arena, daily schedules, and all the other ways we choose to live and die for Christ and our neighbors. (Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm)

I would like to encourage us to consider a few questions:

Do we treat the world around us as incarnational or simply as material? To treat the world as incarnational requires digging deeper below the surface and understanding Jesus' call to faith. Faith is not only something you have but something you do. Faith is keeping the flesh together with the spirit to live deeply, appreciating our interdependence and interconnectedness with the Creator, creation, and our fellow creatures.

Do we prefer religion to God?

Are we, like the disciples, offended by Jesus' offer of spirit and life?

Do we feel good about serving in the soup kitchen, but refuse to forgive our pewmate for his addiction?

Do we feel righteous when we teach Sunday school, but are annoyed by the coos of the baby in worship?

Do we make religion about the rules because we can control the rules?

The truth is we can amend books of order, use Scripture to oppress, and punish the rule breakers much easier than embodying compassion and forgiveness. But is amending books of order, using Scripture to oppress, and punish the rule breakers, really what Jesus is calling us to do?

In the moment we choose the ever-strange charge of faith in Christ to eat Jesus' flesh and drink Jesus' blood- we truly abide in him and he in us- we choose life. We give up the notion that we are in control. We choose compassion and forgiveness. We understand that we are no better than any other child of God because of our denomination, skin color, gender, or job. We turn over to God that which we fear most, trusting that we are loved. When we can accept the love of God that is pure grace, love flows from us and we love others. We do forgive our pew mate for his addiction. We stop in real conversation with the homeless woman on the street corner. We value the baby fussing during worship. We suddenly prefer God to religion. (Amy C. Howe)

Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm shares a short story:

“When my grandmother immigrated to the U.S. from Italy, she had high hopes for her children’s prosperity in the land of plenty. Yet she often puzzled over what she saw as the pursuit of happiness. Pointing to the loaves of bread at the local supermarket, I remember her asking, “Why do people eat-a these things? They have no taste.” She used to say that life was too short to eat anything but good bread, to drink anything but good wine. Little wonder we spent nearly every Saturday of my childhood making our own bread, pizza, and pasta for our family. Why settle for bread that is not bread, for life that is not life?”