

Year B Proper 20 John 6 verses 51 to 58 The Bread of Life is My Flesh

John's Gospel is the only Gospel that doesn't contain the "Words of Institution" that we know so well from Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples...The words Jesus says as he gives them the bread..."This is my body" and the words Jesus says as he gives them the cup of wine..."This is my blood". Each time we share bread and drink wine together, we remember that Jesus died to defeat the corrupted powers of this world and we know we are being formed into the one body of Christ as we share his body...the bread...and his blood...the wine. We know that, somehow, we are partaking of the body and blood of Christ.

John doesn't write about Jesus saying these words at the Last Supper yet we know that John passionately believed this to be true. We heard it last week, and the week before, and this week, and we'll hear it next week again...Jesus is the bread of life. His blood is eternal life. Whoever eats of Jesus will never hunger. Whoever drinks of Jesus will never thirst. John doesn't package this idea up neatly and hand it to us once at the Last Supper. John washes this idea over us, again and again throughout his Gospel. Through John, we hear Jesus give us this message over and over as he lives his life, as he brings his message of hope and salvation to the people. Jesus brings God among us, tells us God's purpose – that we love one another as God has loved us – and he gives us the way to salvation which is healing wholeness. He is the bread of life. What we need to do is be hungry enough to eat that bread.

There are a couple of roadblocks in our way – the same two roadblocks we see in the crowd and in the Jewish leaders who are now having this conversation with Jesus today. Let's remember, first of all, that these leaders are grumbling. Jesus is really pushing them to think of God's salvation and Messiah beyond what they expect and believe. As we talked about last week, the Jewish people knew that they

had been chosen by God to address and deal with problems within God's creation. They had a firm idea, based on scripture, on how that was going to all play out. Jesus was very firmly telling them they needed to readjust their picture of how and when God's kingdom would fully be realized on earth and who the Messiah was who was going to make it happen.

Jesus is not making it easy on them. Part of his pushing is to shock them. This is lost on us in our English translation but Jesus switches the words he uses for the word "eat". When the Jewish leaders are all upset and confused that he's just said to them his flesh is the bread of life he's giving them to eat, he then doubles down. He switches from the usual word for "eat" (*phago*) to the less common word "*trogo*" (v.54) which is a word meant to imitate the sound associated with it – like the "hiss" of a snake or the "meow" of a cat. *Trogo* means "munch" or "gnaw" and it conjurs up the noisy eating of an animal. It's the type of urgent and desperate eating of a starving person who's just been given his first meal in days. It's eating like your life depends on it, because, actually, it does, doesn't it?

Jesus, if physically standing here now, would certainly be trying to shock a few firm ideas out of us as well. The Church has had a long history of deciding on God's behalf who should be allowed in God's kingdom and who should not. We have some firm ideas that turn out to be bad ideas and we try to change...like ordaining women instead of telling them to keep quiet in church...allowing people to divorce and remarry when we used to tell them they could no longer even share Christ's body and blood with us. For countless generations now, society has told us what theology to believe about our God and about our faith – Despite the fact that we pray it every week...thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven...people are surprised when you tell them God's plan is to redeem the earth, not destroy it. Despite the fact that we say

it every week...We believe in the resurrection of the body...people are surprised when you tell them God's plan is to resurrect us just as Jesus was. "The mind is the hardest thing to change." Yet that is exactly what we must do so that, unlike the leaders talking with Jesus, we will accept his radical teachings and his offer of the wholeness of life with God in God's kingdom that begins as soon as we accept him, the Bread of Life. As N.T Wright points out, with Jesus, "the kingdom of God had arrived, ...the new age had broken in to the midst of the present age, had dawned upon a surprised and unready world" (p.142 of *The Challenge of Jesus*). We're a part of the new age and that's exciting. It's even more exciting to know that we have a hand in bringing the perfection, in mending this world. That excitement fuels our hunger – our hunger for the Bread of Life found in Word and food, our foundation for the pattern and shape of all we do to build the body of Christ in the world.

The other roadblock we see in the crowd is the "what's in it for me?" mentality. As Jesus pointed out to them, they were following in order to fill their bellies with more bread and fish. They desired to have personal needs filled. Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology, Ginger Barfield, tells us that none of us can resist the "what's in it for me?" – not all the time. As we talked about a few weeks ago, Jesus knows this is tough for us and he gives us himself to refocus our desires onto what truly gives us joy and wholeness. Psalm 119 says, "Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless; and give me life in your ways" (v.37). Jesus turns our eyes away from the worthless things that the world values and, today, provides an amazing list of what he gives us:

- To have life ongoing (verse 54)
- To be raised on the last day (verse 54)
- To abide in Jesus (verse 56)

- To have Jesus abide in [us] (verse 56)
- To live because of/for the sake of Jesus (verse 57)
- To live forever (verse 58)

These are the desires we experience and form within ourselves each time we gather together to worship with Jesus in our midst – the heart and the gift of the Church. These are the desires that form our hunger to bring that heart and gift to the rest of the world.

Lutheran Pastor, Timothy Smith tells of a summer spent in Africa, immediately following his college graduation. He says he was a starry-eyed youth intent on both discovering and then changing the world, changing the world with the love of Christ. Tim went to work with Pastor Barry Lang, a Canadian missionary based in the town of Bong Mine, Liberia. He was pastorally responsible for a wide geographical area with dozens of tiny villages. The area was out in what they called "The Bush," which really meant isolated from development, electricity, or roads easily passable by vehicle. It was a rare and much-anticipated treat when once or twice a year the pastor came and celebrated with the villagers the sacraments of baptism and Holy Eucharist. On these visits, Timothy joined Pastor Lang for a few weeks, two or three times per week. Up before the sun, home long after dark.

On one long drive, Pastor Lang shared with Timothy as they bumped along deeply rutted roads that they might not be completely welcome in today's village. That got his attention! The descendants of village medicine men, Pastor Lang explained, felt that Christianity had taken away ***their*** rightful power and control over the villagers. So they would on occasion put on hideous masks to scare and threaten the villagers.

"Bush Devils," as they were known, most commonly appeared when the people were gathering for Christian worship. On more than one occasion, Lang said, while he was leading Holy Eucharist in some remote village, the dreaded bush devil drums would begin to beat, and all the would-be worshipers would scoop up their children and flee to their huts. Several Christians, including a few missionaries during Lang's time who chose to defy the drumbeat warnings, had permanently vanished. As Timothy listened, he grew quite frightened at the Pastor's words.

They reached the village; and as they set up for Eucharist in the mud and thatch church, sure enough, it happened...the thump, thump, thump of drums. Faster. Louder. Timothy saw Pastor Lang frown. All of the villagers who had greeted them so warmly disappeared into their huts. His heart was thumping along with the drums. What would he do if a bush devil, or several, appeared? Run? Hide? Fight!?

His swirling thoughts were interrupted by a bell. Not a pretty bell, but a tinny clanging sound, and there was Pastor Lang, ringing the old church bell calling the people to worship. The louder and faster the drums beat, the more furiously he pulled the rope on that bell...a contest, it seemed...clang, clang vs. thump, thump! Until abruptly, Lang stopped, and Timothy followed his sweaty gaze to an ancient stooped woman slowly shuffling her calloused bare feet toward the church in defiance of the threatening drums. Faces began to peep from the hut windows in horror and then in disbelief...and finally admiration. The old woman stopped at the church door, glanced back once more at the jungle where the sound of thumping could still be heard and stepped into the church. Lang resumed his ringing and then others followed, hesitantly and timidly at first, then boldly and defiantly! Women, then little naked children, and then the men came streaming toward the church, and the drums fell silent. No bush devil appeared, as their greatest weapons of fear

and intimidation had failed. And Timothy says they shared together with no lights, no organ, no stained glass, the most powerful Holy Eucharist he had ever experienced. Thanks to that old woman who put it all on the line.

In a small village suffering from violence, disease, and lack of food, that woman trusted above all else the promise that Jesus, the life-giving bread was there, and she not only came and shared it but inspired others to do the same. Yes, that experience in Africa is extreme...We all have homes to return to with food in the cupboards and food in the fridge and yet we are no less hungry. Our hunger isn't the pain in the belly hunger. It, in some ways, is worse. We spend a lifetime trying to fill that void in our souls that only Christ can fill with living bread.

Saints through the ages, including that old Liberian woman, chose to go against the cultural current of self-interest, to walk to the beat of a different drum, or in her case, a different bell. We all hear drum beats in our lives, encouraging us to walk a different path from that of Jesus Christ...Drumbeats of grief and fear, brokenness and guilt, independence and self-interest pound loudly in our heads and hearts until we feel cut off and even unaware of our need for any living bread from heaven. But it's amazing what someone will do when she's hungry. It's even more amazing what God does to feed that hunger.

Jesus laid his life on the line. And the bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Fed with that flesh, may we have the courage to do the same.