

August 18, 2024

Become What You Receive

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

If you're thinking "Did Amanda forget to change this week's gospel lesson? Did we just read last week's gospel lesson?" you are not far off

We're in a brief season during this Ordinary Time that some preachers refer to as the "Bread of Life" series – it started with Jesus' miracle of feeding the crowd from a boy's five barley loaves at the end of July and it will extend to next week when our Intern, Mary, can tackle the theme

We're in the thick of the "Bread of Life" series and we're in the thick of John's great writing and imagery

It would make sense if we responded to Jesus saying "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" much like his contemporaries responded: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

What does this guy mean that he is giving us his flesh to eat?! It's absurd and it's certainly not kosher

Peter Claver Ajer, Professor of New Testament at Bexley Seabury Seminary in Chicago reminds us that "as is typical of John's Gospel, the absurdity of a statement should lead us to think beyond the ordinary, to interpret symbolically or metaphorically."¹

For those who have lived the faith for sometime, perhaps you've already moved past the literal meaning of Jesus' comment and have gone right to the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of his words by making a connection between what Jesus is saying and the Holy Eucharist, and you would be right to do so

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-20-2/commentary-on-john-651-58-6>

John's gospel doesn't include the institution of Holy Communion at the last supper the way the other gospels do – John tells the story of Jesus washing the disciples feet at the last supper instead – and some scholars wonder if all this “bread of life” dialog is how Jesus institutes Holy Communion in John's gospel²

It's not in the context of a final meal, rather it's smack dab in the midst of his ministry

It's not at a time of betrayal and fear, it's in the context of a miracle of blessing and abundance

Our Eucharistic prayers draw from the other Gospels and Paul's letters when we say “On the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, blessed it, gave it to his disciples and said ‘take and eat, this is my body given for you’” and same with the wine “this is my blood shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sin”

John doesn't have that text or that context, but in John's text Jesus says “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...whoever eats me will live because of me”

Perhaps the early church Fathers thought John's text sounded just a little too gruesome to include in the liturgy

But whether it's the text from the other gospels or this text from John, all this language is still a bit odd, isn't it?

“take, eat, this is my body” – “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”

² <https://www.ekkesiaproject.org/lectionary/2024/8/12/8i5oyiyxnta7clskitk9yay0u0056t>

No wonder the early Christians were accused of being cannibals.

How do we convey the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of Jesus' words as Dr. Ajer encourages us, while also not diminishing the significance of the sacrament Jesus proclaimed when he said "I am the bread of life" and "do this in remembrance of me"

It's possible that we have become a bit numb to the shock of the "body" and "blood" words that we use each week in the Eucharistic Prayer, but how do we convey the meaning of the moment without terrifying people by saying "come, chew on the flesh of Jesus, all are welcome"?

When I was a seminarian out in California, I was invited to assist at the table when an Episcopal priest was supplying for my supervisor

He lead the Eucharistic liturgy reading the Lutheran liturgy that I was becoming so familiar with as I was being formed and trained to be a Lutheran minister – and the words are very similar to the Eucharistic Prayers in the Book of Common Prayer

Everything felt familiar and usual until as he finished the Eucharistic Prayer and began the invitation to communion he lifted the elements and said these words: "Beloveds come! Behold who you are, become what you receive"

For a brief moment I was breathless, I stared at the elements in his hands still held aloft and said the words again in my head: "Behold who you are, become what you receive"

What an invitation and what words and imagery around Holy Communion – what an incredible way to think about what my "communion" with God in this bread and wine accomplish

It turns out these are St. Augustine's words, one of the early Church Fathers from North Africa in the 4th-5th Century – words he believed

summarized the Eucharistic mystery and words that, he believed, if we truly grasped their meaning would change our lives³

“Behold who you are, become what you receive”

“Behold who you are...” Look! You are the body of Christ! You are flesh/body and blood. You are embodied love and grace.

“...become what you receive!” Become Christ! Become nourishment for the world! Be bread, broken and given to nourish the lives of those you will encounter. Breathe life and hope into creation

Perhaps the more modern phrase would be to say “you are what you eat”

But I like Augustine’s words: “behold who you are, become what you receive”

I do believe that John and the other gospel writers tell the stories of Jesus claiming to be the bread of heaven and lifting up bread and calling it his body given for us in an effort to proclaim the very transformation of our person Augustine articulated when he preached: “behold who we are, become what we receive”

Daniel Rentfro, professor at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland writes that “to be graced by the Wisdom of the Word, it is not enough to hear it, or even to believe it. We must literally in-corporate it, and thereby embody it -- make it the sum and substance of who we are.”⁴

The love of God poured out to the world in the body and blood of Jesus is not just something we intellectually grasp or understand, it is something we literally in-corporate, it is something we strive embody

³ <https://www.catholicreligious.org.au/gospel-reflections/2019/6/21/become-what-you-receive->

⁴ <https://www.ekkesiaproject.org/lectionary/2024/8/12/8i5oyiynta7clskitk9yay0u0056t>

Jesus said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them"

The language is odd, but how astonishing that in the Eucharistic meal and imagery, the words "flesh" "body" "blood" become the synonyms for "love" "grace" "justice"

Because the words "flesh" "body" "blood" "love" "grace" "justice" when weaved together take the form of our beloved Savior, Jesus the Christ

And it is Jesus Christ – "flesh" "body" "blood" "love" "grace" "justice"-- which constitute the very stuff we chew on as faithful disciples of Christ

"flesh" "body" "blood" "love" "grace" "justice" the very essence of who we are when Christ dwells in us and we dwell in Christ

So, beloveds, this morning you are invited to come to the table, to "behold who you are," and to "become what you receive." Amen.