

“Eat My Flesh”: Comfort food, fast food, or eternal food?

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, August 23, 2009.

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Joshua, Moses’ successor, has just finished conquering of the Promised Land for the Israelites, after a series of bruising battles, to say the least, including one in which he had the sun stand still for a week so they all could keep on fighting. Now he turns to the people and prepares them for the job of living on this piece of real estate that is now theirs.

Joshua knows his people. He remembers when they made a golden calf to worship because they wanted to be like other people with their beautiful golden idols. So he turns to them and offers them a way out of following the God who gave them the Ten Commandments, the God who says that he is the one and only God. “If you are not willing to serve God, then decide today who you will serve. You can’t go on until you made a decision one way or the other. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” The people answer right away, “Oh, yes, we will serve the Lord, too!” But Joshua, I’m afraid, knew them better than they knew themselves, because it wasn’t long before they were chasing after whatever idols suited their fancy out there, apparently forgetting the sincere and heartfelt commitment that they had made to Joshua. And for the rest of the Old Testament time, forgetfulness about God seems to come quite easily. God just doesn’t keep our attention.

A couple of thousand years later, Jesus again confronts this rather embarrassing but common weak spot in the human condition. In the Fourth Gospel, we come to a turning point in John 6. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus does spectacular and wondrous things like walking on water and feeling ballpark-size crowds. With these acts to pique their interest, he takes them to the spiritual brink of the Promised Land. But like Joshua, he knows his people. They have asked for more—more flashy miracles, more flamboyant signs, and more free food. But how much of that will stick? And how much will just be a flash in the pan of their spiritual life? When Jesus starts talking about getting serious, he finds out. *I AM your food and drink. I don’t just fill you up; I keep you alive. But you can’t just nibble on me. You have to chew on my flesh; you have to drink my blood. You have to be so committed that you are in me and I am in you.* Then somebody speaks for all of them: “This is too hard!” And his followers whittle down from thousands to twelve—11 ½ if you don’t count Judas all the way. Like the people in the Promised Land, Jesus’ early disciples found themselves unable to commit to the demands of a relationship with God. By the end of John 6, he has lost most of them.

That turning point in John’s Gospel is a time when the people look at a great promise—the promise of eternal life. But that promise is accompanied by a great demand on their commitment to Jesus. Many leave Jesus, perhaps for good. A few stay, saying as Peter does, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” In some way, every day is a turning point for each of us, in our own spiritual life.

Sometimes, we may come to a critical time when a Joshua, or even a crisis in our life, prods us to question the depth of our faith. Sometimes the prod may be our own dissatisfied self, a sense of emptiness or discontent with our relationship with God. When this happens, what brings us to decide, “This is too hard”? And what helps us to say, like Peter, “I will stay with you,” or like Joshua, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”?

Anthony de Mello tells this story about wanting God. Every day the disciple would ask the same question: “How can I find God?” And every day he would get the same answer: “Through desire.” “But I desire God with all my heart, don’t I? Then why haven’t I found him?” One day the master happened to be bathing in the river when the disciple entered the water. The master pushed the man’s head underwater and held it there while the poor fellow struggled desperately to break loose. The next day, it was the master who began the conversation. “Why did you struggle so much when I held your head under water?” “Because I was gasping for air.” The master then said, “When you can gasp for God the way you gasped for air, you will find him.”

I don’t think we need to be nearly drowning in order to gasp for God. But we do need to know and to admit, deep in our bones, how much we need God. We need to know what it means to say to God, “Only you have the words of eternal life.” In this world full of work to do, and worries to worry, and distractions to entertain us—our need for God doesn’t always fall on the front burner of our lives. It takes the discipline of regular spiritual practices to keep remembering that God is like the air we need to breathe. You know the drill—daily or weekly Eucharist to feed us, regular times to learn about God, daily prayer to keep in touch. There’s a story about a man who was praying in church, out loud. Suddenly he stopped in the middle of a sentence and said, “Oh God, I’m sorry, I told you that yesterday.” He was so confident that God was keeping in touch with him.

It’s easy to learn a discipline of spiritual practice. But it’s also all too easy to lose that discipline and then to lose that sense of relationship with God and then our desire for God. In our busy lives, regular prayer and devotion often get pushed aside for lack of time—though for Martin Luther, it was the opposite. He said that the busier he felt, the longer he had to pray. But for the rest of us, a deep spiritual life is both easy and hard—a paradox of Christian life that runs all through the New Testament readings. It’s easy because our relationship with God is pure gift to us, without strings attached. It’s hard because that relationship demands the commitment of our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.

I have always been intrigued by the paradox of Christianity. It is both too easy and too hard. Jesus tells us, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” That is easy. But then he sets up the terms of a relationship with him that is worthy of the parties involved, and we, the human party, always fall short. But then he gives us that relationship anyway.

He asks that we come to him with the commitment of all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind. “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.” That is hard. But even when we come to him half-heartedly, looking not for survival food but for comfort food—a feel-good spirituality, easy to swallow but nothing daring or demanding of us—he gives it to us anyway.

He asks that we come to him starving for oneness and union with him. “Abide in me, and I abide in you.” For us naturally self-centered humans, that is hard. But even when we treat our spiritual discipline more like a topping that we drizzle on top of the real part of our life, he gives us that union anyway.

He asks that we come to him burning with desire for him. “You must chew on my flesh and drink my blood. You must want me that much.” That is hard. But even when we treat the Eucharist more like fast food than like eternal food—giving us spirituality on the run, leaving us vaguely unfulfilled for the long term—and he gives us eternity with him anyway.

But the greatest paradox is that, as much as we talk about gasping for God and seeking God, it is God who gasps for us and who seeks us so dearly. It is Jesus who so desires us that he would pour his blood out for us, at every turning point of our lives. With the food of his body and blood that he gives to us, may we have the grace to pour ourselves out for him, every day of our life.