

Smoke Rise Baptist Church

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August 23, 2009

“You Are What You Eat”

John 6:56-69

I am always so excited when I get an opportunity to preach. Actually, when Bob came to me several weeks ago and asked me to fill in for him today, I was so excited that I (being the over-achiever I can be) went right to my desk, and I logged on to textweek.com (which is a site that gives ministers the lectionary text for every Sunday of the year.) I searched through the Sunday's of 2009, until I came upon the scripture for August 23rd. I was filled with excitement as I began to think about putting pen to paper and writing a sermon that really captured your hearts and minds. Maybe I would get to preach a sermon about love or justice or the environment or maybe even, submission.

Oh but then I saw it- I should have known, we've been reading through John 6 for weeks. Oh but it was still a shock to read... “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me.” *You know I've been thinking-* I think they did this to me on purpose. Danny even stuck his head in my office a few weeks ago and said with a smile on his face, “You got a doozie this time.” How was I going to preach this stuff? You gotta admit, if you weren't all read up on this being a Christian thing, it sounds pretty gross. It sounds like a Twilight movie or horror film... eating flesh and drinking blood.

While reading and re-reading the text, somewhere in the 25th or 26th time through, my mind and focus temporarily shifted to my childhood dinner table. I could see my family all gathered at the kitchen table. Sweet tea swirling around in a clear pitcher with ice and lemon. The smell of my daddy's grilled chicken and a platter overflowing with grilled vegetables- squash, zucchini, asparagus, and corn still in the husk. I thought about the fear and trepidation most kids feel about eating vegetables, and I heard that slogan my mom would say over and over again, “Carra, you are what you eat! So eat that brain food.” It was her campaign to teach my brothers and me the value of a balanced diet. It helped me understand that what I consumed, what food I ate, affected my entire body.

I felt enlightened as I returned to the text in John 6. I couldn't help but think of my mama's words as I pondered on the rich metaphor Jesus created for us in these verses. “You are what you eat...” But before we tuck our napkin in our shirt and hold fork in hand ready to dig into this metaphor of eating flesh and drinking blood, let's go back several verses, all the way back to the conclusion of John 5, to get a glimpse of the bigger picture of why Jesus would make such a “gross” and cannibalistic statement.

One of the most important things I ever learned in seminary was about “getting the whole story.” Not merely reading a verse or two (and taking things out of context), but really looking for the connections in entire chapters and in entire books of Scripture. We see throughout the book of John that people in and around Jerusalem were growing suspicious and more hostile towards Jesus as he began explaining more and more about who he was and who sent him. In the final verses of John 5, Jesus was trying to convince the crowd that had gathered in Jerusalem that he is the son of God. Jesus was all but begging them to hear his message from the One who had sent him. Knowing that these folks knew their scripture and knew about Moses being called by God, Jesus pleaded with them, “If you believe in Moses, you should believe in me. I am the one he wrote about.”

Transitioning into the 6th chapter of John, we read the story of the Feeding of the Multitude. This is when we, as readers, begin to notice several similarities in the story unraveling about Jesus and the story already told of Moses. We read of Jesus multiplying the Loaves which had strong connections with Moses receiving Manna from Heaven¹. Then in verse 16, we get another comparison of Jesus and Moses when Jesus walks on the sea to the disciples' boat much like Moses

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Interpreting Biblical Text. The Gospels and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 154.

crossing and splitting the sea. These “Moses-like” actions Jesus was performing, I believe, were a very intentional part of Jesus’ attempt to be identified as God’s son, God incarnate.

As we move on into verse 22, Jesus continues to try to explain his identity to the crowd and the reader begins to see more references to bread and thus the metaphor begins. We hear Jesus refer to himself as “The Bread of Life.” It is in the following verses that a clear pattern emerges² that helps us understand what Jesus was doing. Dr. Alan Culpepper outlines this pattern for us in his commentary on John and puts it into four concise sections.

*First, the **Introduction** (verses 25-31)- the crowd wants to know who Jesus is. So, Jesus tells them he is the bread from heaven.

*Next, the crowd wants to know **Who Gave Us This Bread from Heaven?** And in verses 32-34, Jesus tells them, “It was not Moses... It was my Father.”

*Then, they want to know, in the verses that follow, well **What Is The Bread From Heaven?** Seems like the next obvious question right? Jesus answers them, “I am the Bread of Life”

*And in the final section, which is our scripture text for today, the crowd wants to know **How Does One Eat this Bread From Heaven?** So Jesus answers metaphorically, “One must eat my flesh and drink my blood.”

It is critical for us to recognize that Jesus, as he did most of the time, is using metaphor to convey a very serious message. Yet followers throughout the centuries have interpreted these verses quite differently. For example, many Catholics believe in something called Transubstantiation. (Say that 10 times fast) Transubstantiation is the belief that when taking Eucharist, or communion, that the real presence of Christ is in the bread and wine. While we Baptists, believe that the bread and juice are symbols gesture and a way to remember Christ and the covenant we have with him.

This parable from Jesus is one rich metaphor about consuming the Bread of Life. This parable is not one that we passively read through and come away unaffected by it. The irony in this text is that we not only need to consume this Bread of Life, but we need to consume these words. After all, if the Bread of Life is Christ and Christ is the Word according to John 1, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” then we need to not only consume the Bread of Life but these words and the stories filling these pages.

This parable is one we must read actively. We have to truly consume it, take it in, and let it change us. *This parable should truly inspire and transform us because it invites us in to engage ourselves with the text.* One of my favorite contemporary theologians is a guy named Peter Rollins and he write about the power of parable in one of his books saying this: “A parable does not primarily provide information about our world. Rather, if we allow it to do its work within us, it will change our world- breaking it open to ever-new possibilities by refusing to be held by the categories that currently exist within that world. In this way the parable transforms the way we hold reality, and thus changes reality itself.”³

So... you are what you eat. Just as my mom was giving wise advice to me about the food I was putting in my body and how it was holistically effecting me, Jesus (through this metaphor) was/is giving wise advice about feeding on Christ and the effects of being a Christ-follower on our whole bodies. What does it mean to consume the Living Bread, to consume Jesus?

Well, you are what you eat. If you eat of the Living Bread, your body, your mind, and your spirit will be affected by the Living Bread. If you are truly consuming the words of Jesus, your body and actions should reflect that diet. I know you all must have seen the commercial where the woman is walking around her workplace with huge donuts connected to her hips. And the point of the commercial was that “you are what you eat” and this woman apparently liked her junky breakfast instead of a healthy one.

² This pattern outlined by R. Alan Culpepper in IBT, *The Gospels and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 154-161.

³ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales* (Bruester, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2009), xi.

We can tell by the reaction of the disciples that they felt like they were “biting off more than they could chew.” It was not an easy assignment for them to fully ingest Jesus. And it not easy for us either. We all know a healthy diet is hard to stick to. But it is hard to deny the changes that will begin to take place within our bodies if we are sticking to our diet of The Living Bread, our diet of following Jesus. When we begin to consume the parables and teachings of Jesus, we will be changed by them. We will be affected physically, mentally, and spiritually *if we dare* sit at the table and eat of the Living Bread.

I dare you to digest the stories of compassion and grace and love and then try to live a life without compassion. It’s impossible, because once we have fed upon Christ it is hard to deny the deep changes it makes in us.

I dare you to consume a spiritual discipline by praying, meditating, or journaling and then try to live a life where you ignore the growth of your soul and the deepening of your faith. It is impossible, because once you have nourished your soul your entire being is affected.

I dare you to dig in with both hands into scripture, bible commentaries, or books by modern theologians and open your mind to new interpretations and new thoughts then try to go back and close your mind. It’s impossible, because once you have been fed with knowledge and your mind opened to all that God is and could be, there is no putting God back in a that little box you’ve kept God in so long.

What is it that you consume? What is it that you feed off of and take in to your body? So often, you and I are so full from “junk food” our bellies are too stuffed to eat of the Living Bread. We devour things like sports, social clubs, internet, and TV. We guzzle down celebrity gossip, church gossip, and workplace drama. We stuff our bellies with so many things that we leave little room for the food that gives us Life.

I dare you to consume this Living Bread. Let this be the diet that you stick to. Consume Christ- take him in, digest his words, feed off his teachings, and let it change your entire being. And may the people around you notice the difference.
Amen.