

So, when Pastor Jon told me he was taking some much needed R&R and that I would be preaching my first sermon this weekend, I got unreasonably excited. Not just because I really wanted to try my hand at preaching, but also because through our lectionary (our weekly assigned texts from scripture), we are in an odd season I like to call “the summer of bread” because it’s this 4-week period where all we talk about is John 6, and how Jesus is the Bread of Life, and we pull out a WHOLE bunch of carbo-loaded metaphors from the Bible. It’s FANTASTIC. If you know me, you know I love linking food and faith. This was just going to be TOO GOOD.

So I went to the lectionary to see what I was going to get to preach on. And I read it, and the exact word I said aloud was “gross.” I’m sorry, but Gospel of our Lord? I don’t know - Jesus said the words “blood” and “flesh” a few too many times for my taste. Like, I grew up in the church, I’ve been participating in Communion for a while now. I kinda know what this is about. But if we were to read this completely out of context, this just doesn’t look so good for us. Why in the world would Jesus insist on being so weird about this?

So I thought - well maybe things just got that gross through translation. So I went back to the original Greek, and to my dismay, things just got weirder. Obviously, this graphic language used here is intentional.

We like to think of Jesus as this really cool, chill, overwhelmingly NICE guy. In fact, that’s how we like to see all aspects of God - that God made us and loves us unconditionally and is always with us and just wants us to love each other. And none of that is false, but I wonder sometimes if that’s all we choose to see because it’s comfortable. This text we’re given today snaps us out of that, gives us a really difficult image to work with.

Jesus is speaking to the crowd gathered in a synagogue in Capernaum, who have really been struggling to understand some of the more abstract things Jesus has been teaching. They are much more grounded in worldly things - things they can see with their eyes and experience with their bodies. They aren’t really grasping this whole, Bread-of-Life-that-isn’t-really-physical-bread, sort of thing. All they can think about is that Jesus gave them some food and now they’re hungry again. So they ask Jesus for more, and Jesus speaks these words. He seeks to challenge their perspective, and they really turn to one another and say “I’m sorry - did he just say we’re supposed to eat his flesh? And drink his blood?” (Again, pretty gross.)

But this is all about Jesus challenging these people, and by extension challenging us as his followers, to rethink our image of God. How many of you imagine God as some person up in the sky? That's not uncommon. When I picture God I tend to visualize this big, light pink, fluffy cloud in the sky that doesn't really have a face and yet is somehow always smiling. It's a God that is sweet, and distant but "only a phone call away." Here, we are faced with a God who is gritty, who appears in human form with tangled hair and sore muscles and stinky breath and dirt under his fingernails, who healed people with his spit, who is telling his friends that they must *eat him* in order to *live forever*. This God wants to get under our skin, and succeeds over and over. This God makes us a little uncomfortable, challenges us, makes us think about things that we don't really want to think about, and yet wants more than anything for us to put time and effort into a relationship with God. Beyond all else, this God is intensely and intentionally CLOSE to us, and this is demonstrated by this text, where Jesus asks his disciples to consume him, so that they might in turn BE consumed BY him.

What does it mean to have our God be this intimately connected with us? That God watches over us, but also once walked among us, and now lives inside us? That a couple thousand years after these events transpired, we still gather and eat the body of Christ which was BROKEN for us? And drink the blood of Christ which was SHED for us?

I've been thinking a bit lately about why Christians gather for church. It's not uncommon for people to expect church to be a place of rest, a break from the world around us, a break from the things that make us feel sad, angry, hurt, or afraid. I've heard from folks that they come to church so they might have the strength to go on from this place and endure all of those bad, scary things. And that makes A LOT of sense to me - there is so much value in rest and renewal. But that also challenges me, because that's not how I view church. I have thought that church is where we should openly explore those things that are hurting God's people and God's world, to decide as a community how to actively respond based on our Bible and theology, to be fed for the journey, and be sent out by the Spirit, not just to endure the things of this world, but to actively engage with them.

That line of thinking is what compels me to stand up in front of a church and say things like... I believe that God-given Queerness is beautiful, and that criminal justice reform directly aligns with the Gospel message. I believe that disabled prophets are worth

listening to, and that the earth that God entrusted to our care is worth saving; I believe that vaccines and masks are how we love our neighbor, and that black and brown lives shouldn't just matter but they should be valued and honored. And I believe that Jesus, a Jewish law-breaking refugee, who had brown skin and dirty hair and didn't speak a lick of English, commands us to welcome the immigrant and provide for the poor, that he flipped tables when he witnessed injustice, and that we are called to follow in Christ's example. I say these things, even though they may be challenging, even though I am challenged by the notion that church *could* be a place of rest from these worldly topics, because I worship and follow a God who embraces challenge. And if you don't believe some of the same things as me, that's totally okay - we aren't meant to all think the same; that's what makes a community beautiful. But I feel like we need to talk about some of these "taboo" things in our church, so we can be knowledgeable about the things that are hurting God's people, discern how God commands us to respond, and accept our call to be God's hands and feet in the world, working to correct wrongs and bring us closer to the kin-dom of God. Today, I just hope that our text might inspire us to hear a challenging word and commit to wrestling with it together.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life; for 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."

Siblings in Christ, today in scripture Jesus calls us to a place of discomfort. Jesus speaks words to us that are hard to wrap our heads around. Our world and our lives are FULL of challenges, and we struggle to make sense of it all. But the good news today and every day is that we do not struggle alone. In a few minutes, we will have the joy and privilege of partaking in the odd and beautiful practice so aptly called Communion, wherein we aren't just joined into community with the Triune God, but also with each other and all those who participate in Communion. We commit to continuing to wrestle together with the gritty grace stuff, with the God who gets under our skin and insists on speaking words that we aren't entirely comfortable with. And on those days when you look at what God gave you to work with, and (like me) your first thought is "gross", I pray that you find ways to lean on the community of Christ as you push forward and embrace the challenge. Amen.