

August 19, 2018
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
John 6:51-58

[Jesus said to the crowds:] I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?"

Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Background:

Four weeks ago the Gospel text told of the feeding of 5,000 (John 6:1-13). That event led directly to the start of Jesus' instruction centering on the bread of life theme. Last week's text ended with Jesus telling them that he himself is the living bread that comes down from heaven. This is also the first line in today's gospel. Next week the gospel text will be the last verses of this 6th Chapter of John's gospel. In that reading, some of the disciples tell Jesus to his face that this teaching is just too hard to accept, and they will no longer count themselves among his disciples. The attention John has taken to unfold Jesus' bread of life teaching, and the fact that John tells us that some of the disciples departed because they could not accept this teaching, should indicate how important and difficult this teaching was for the early disciples of Jesus to understand and accept.

In the opening verse here, Jesus identifies himself as the bread from heaven. In the next verse he states that whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood has life eternal. The fact that the Jews quarreled among themselves at this statement should not be a surprise. The word that Jesus used (translated here as "eats") would carry a sense of gnawing, as a dog with a bone. Drinking blood was prohibited within the Jewish community and perhaps among the early Christians as well. It should not be surprising that some of the Jews who heard this questioned his teaching. In John's gospel, a question or misunderstanding usually presents the opportunity for Jesus to further explain his teaching.

Jesus explains, "... unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you." (John 6:51) In case they missed the point, Jesus restates this point three more times (verses 53, 54, and 55). The expression "flesh and blood" would be a way to describe a human person. For those in the crowd that Jesus is addressing, the term "flesh and blood" would also call to mind the animals that were ritually slaughtered as offerings to God. Such offerings were made throughout the year, but especially as part of the Passover observance. Jesus is describing himself as the lamb that was killed and had its blood drained so that it could be used as the sacrificial offering. This same connection will be made later in John's gospel when John places the hour of Jesus' death at about the same time that lambs were being killed to be used as part of the Passover. (John 19:17-37)

For John's community, Jesus is their food and drink. Because John's gospel is the last of the four gospels to be written, the community has had the opportunity to reflect on the significance of the Jewish traditions in Jesus' life and teaching for many decades. The experience of God feeding the Jews in the desert was a springboard to help the early Christians understand God's new revelation in Jesus. It was not enough to believe in Jesus, or even to engage in ritual participation in the new customs of the Christian community. They were seeking to understand how God was continuing to nourish with God's real presence on this new journey.

Reflection Questions:

1. What images would you use to describe the human person?
2. How would the experience of making bread be different in the days when Jesus lived than it would be for you?
3. When they heard Jesus tell them that he was the bread of life, what layers of meaning would those people have had that would be missing from most today as we hear these same words?
4. What comes to mind when you think of *true* food?
5. What comes to mind when you think of *true* drink?
6. When you hear in today's gospel that the Jews quarreled among themselves...
7. Do you experience yourself as "being what you eat?" How would that be different for the people of Jesus' day?
8. Can you take some time now to talk with God about whatever came to mind as you heard Jesus teaching that he is the bread of life, or that whoever eats his flesh will have eternal life?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for August 19, 2018, the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven columns;
 she has dressed her meat, mixed her wine, yes, she has spread her table.
 She has sent out her maidens; she calls from the heights out over the city:
 "Let whoever is simple turn in here; To the one who lacks understanding, she says,
 Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed!
 Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding."

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
 I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth.
 Let my soul glory in the Lord; the lowly will hear me and be glad.
 Glorify the Lord with me, let us together extol his name.
 I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.
 Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame.
 When the poor one called out, the Lord heard, and from all his distress he saved him.

Brothers and sisters: Watch carefully how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil.

Therefore, do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord. And do not get drunk on wine, in which lies debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

Jesus said to the crowds: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.

For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Excerpts from Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34:2-7; Ephesians 5:15-20; and John 6:51-58