

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner  
August 16, 2009  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – August 16, 2009  
Consumption

As I started writing this sermon for today, I began to fervently wish that Children's Worship time was also starting on this Sunday. Not because little voices or squirmy little bodies distract me, but because I do not think this particular text from John is meant for little ears. Actually, I would not recommend it for anyone who is queasy or tenderfooted.

Unlike the beautiful metaphorical imagery of John's Prologue (*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God*), Jesus does not employ poetic language in this particular conversation with his followers. Well, at least he does not use **gentle** poetic language. Rather, he is in their face, telling his truth in absolutely stark terms. Allow me to offer you an example: When translating verse 56, our New Revised Standard Version states "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." To me, that is bad enough.

However, I discovered that our translators cleaned up Jesus' words. They decided to translate his speech from the Lord's Supper angle, using the words "eat" and "drink," like the other three Gospels. But those verbs are not really the ones that come from Jesus' mouth. John actually has Jesus saying to the crowd, "Those who chomp and gnaw on my flesh and guzzle my blood abide in me, and I in them." That is pretty stiff stuff for a Sunday morning before lunch. Jesus is using rather barbaric, offensive imagery.

But if John is right, and these are the words that Jesus used, then we must assume that Jesus was being purposefully offensive and shocking. Furthermore, if we find ourselves offended by such gory imagery, than just imagine how it was received back in Jesus' day. You and I have heard Jesus referred to as the living bread often enough for it to lose its initial jaw-dropping scandal. But to his Jewish followers and questioners, Jesus' decision to call himself the living bread sounded crazy. They knew that he was a man, a human being. They knew his mother and his father, his brothers and his sisters.

I am sure that it infuriated or at least confused them that Jesus dared to suggest **he** was living bread who offered a more filling kind of sustenance than even the holy manna that was given to their ancestors. His comments were scandalous. And from what John writes, you can sense the force and shock of his words. Our Bible says that those who heard his words began to dispute among themselves. But, that is probably putting it lightly. One commentator says that the words John uses to suggest a "dispute" are the same words used to describe fistfights and brawls.

And then, as if claiming to be living bread was not enough to stir up the crowd, Jesus has the brazenness to suggest that in order to live an abundant life; in order to really be in true relationship with God; in order to have your story continue after death; then, you must chomp on his flesh and guzzle his blood. Don't you think those people were momentarily stunned? Mothers probably put their hands over their children's ears in

order to protect them from such offense. No one who is in his or her right mind eats human flesh. And in the Jewish culture, drinking blood was strictly forbidden. Jesus' words violated every purity and cleanliness law that existed. His statements were completely offensive to the seekers, the followers, and the questioners. His teaching was an absolute scandal.

And so we have to wonder why Jesus insisted on using such barbaric and offensive imagery. Why did he have to put it that way? The people did not ask for that kind of talk. They were just hungry. Now, as we spoke about a couple of Sundays ago, we know they probably weren't literally hungry at that moment since they had just eaten a big meal the night before-- the feast of bread and fish on the mountain. Those from that crowd probably felt sated, at least for the time being. But, Jesus' miraculous feeding did open up in many of them a different kind of emptiness and hunger. And they were starting to realize that the amazing miracle-worker Jesus possessed some kind of clue, some kind of sustenance, some kind of presence that would fill their emptiness, their famished souls.

So, the crowd hunted Jesus down and asked him point-blank, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" I bet they were looking for the quick-fix, the golden ticket for the abundant-life express, the chapter they needed to read in order to jump-start their "Best Life Now."<sup>1</sup> And their desire offered Jesus a tempting opportunity.

If he had really wanted to capitalize on that energy and their willingness to make him #1 on the bestseller list, all he had to say was, "Well, you don't really have to **do** anything. But if you like, we have many options from which you can choose. You can go to worship when you feel like getting up. If social justice is your thing, then you can serve people who are not as well off as you are. We have optional Sunday School for all ages. Just figure out how much you are willing to commit and then let me know. And in return for your investment, I will meet all your needs, spoon-feed you my living bread and bottle feed you my living water." Trust me, if Jesus had answered them that way, the church would have been a huge success right off the bat.

If Jesus had said those easy, optimistic, clear words, then who knows, he might not have ended up on a lonely cross. But Jesus didn't do it. That is not the choice he made. Instead, Jesus used the most offensive words he could have chosen about discipleship. "You want to be my followers? You want to feel full? You want to live into your calling as a child of God? Then chomp on my flesh and guzzle my blood. Consume me. And I will make my home in you and you will find your home in me." I wonder if he wiped his mouth as he said it, for dramatic effect.

Again, we are brought back to the question: What was going on in Jesus' mind? Why on earth would he choose such a graphic description of discipleship? What might he mean by those offensive, scandalous words? Maybe one other way to hear his words is to think about some of our common, colorful expressions.

Have you ever said to your child or grandchild, "Why, you are so sweet I could just eat you up." Now, of course you don't really mean you could literally eat the child. Rather,

you are using that metaphorical language to convey a deep and overwhelming love for that little one. You want to be as close as you can to that sweet little person who has captured your heart. And I have wondered all week, if that is a taste (pardon the pun) of the devotion that Jesus was trying to call forth with his words.

What if Jesus is calling us to have that same kind of intense focus, that same kind of overwhelming love, that same kind of need for intimacy with the Triune God? What if his words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood are Jesus' scandalous and shocking way of inviting us to be in deep intimacy and closeness with him? Chomp my flesh. Guzzle my blood. You cannot get any closer than that.

Several years ago, in a Bible study about John up here at this church, one of you put it this way "At first in John you eat the bread at the miracle by the lake. Then, you think you still want more. So you search for him across the water. Then, you think you still want more. But the next thing you know, you are faced with taking in the whole of Jesus into every moment of your life." No longer can you remain the same person on Monday after church on Sunday. No longer can you compartmentalize life into church, work, home, fun, etc. No longer is being an active and vital member of a congregation an optional choice. When you consume Jesus, not a particle of your being and not a split second of your life are devoid of his presence.

It is a graphic proposal for life. It is a scandalous way to think of discipleship. It is certainly not church-lite, made palatable for mass marketing. After taking up the call to consume Jesus, nothing will ever be the same. He is calling us to take the whole of who he is as our Savior and our Lord into every moment of our lives. He is calling us to never give into the temptation of leaving our faith at the front door of the sanctuary on our way out. And he is also calling us to no longer leave ourselves, our doubts and our fears, outside the sanctuary on our way in, either.

Consume Jesus. Take the whole of who he is as our Savior and our Lord into every moment of our lives. No longer look at our checkbooks, our resources, or our time the same way again. No longer look at the balance between work and family the same way again. No longer look at strangers the same way again. Consume Jesus. Take the whole of who he is as our Savior and our Lord into every moment of our lives, into every fiber of our being, every pore of our bodies, every ventricle of our hearts.

It is a scandalous way to think of discipleship. But Jesus offers us the invitation. "Consume me." Then, Jesus offers the promise, "And you will find your home, your fullness, your purpose in me, and I will make my home in you." It is almost overwhelming to even consider his offer. But goodness. What might happen if we did?

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<sup>i</sup> With apologies to Oprah. ☺