

Bottoms Up!

John 6:51-58; Ephesians 5:15-20

Whitefish UMC

August 16, 2009

- † Can you imagine being a creature from another planet, plunked down here in Whitefish, shopping for a church? I know, it's a stretch, but bear with me. Pretend you've just come into our church today and hear these words:
- † “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day, for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.”
- † You'd probably say something like: “Gross!! These people must be cannibals!” But then you'd look closely at the nice people here who have invited you to sit near them. And you wouldn't stay around for fellowship time.
- † It wasn't quite as bad a shock for the first century audience that first heard the words from John's gospel. They were used to language of blood and sacrifice. In fact the temple altar in Jerusalem was soaked in blood. The Jews no longer sacrificed human beings after the Lord God substituted a ram for the boy Isaac when Abraham was ready to offer his precious son to God.
- † But as we know from the story of Jesus entering the temple courts just before his arrest and crucifixion, people came to worship in the temple and bought doves or other animals to offer as sacrifices for thanksgiving and forgiveness. In the pagan world of Jesus' time,

- blood sacrifices were also common and would have been familiar to the hearers of John's gospel as well.
- † As one writer says, tongue in cheek, "If one day someone perfects time travel and then asks you to be on the altar guild in the [Jerusalem] temple, don't do it."
 - † Everyone in the first century knew about animal sacrifice, and so it was natural to them for Jesus to speak of his coming death in those terms, and it made sense for the first Christians to memorialize his death in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, using language that identifies it with the sacrificial ritual they all knew.
 - † But that didn't mean that language about eating and drinking the flesh and blood of the sacrificial offering was acceptable. In fact one way pagans and Jews discredited early Christians was to accuse them of eating human flesh. And we can understand how easy it would have been to succeed in demonizing those first followers of Jesus' commands.
 - † No wonder the practice of Eucharist became so strangely sanitized over the centuries. In fact I grew up on such a sterile communion ritual that Jesus' flesh was never mentioned.
 - † There were neatly cubed pieces of white bread and silver and glass thimblefuls of grape juice, but we never talked about the blood. On Christmas and Easter the communion servers (all men) wore tuxedos as if they were distributing hors d'oeuvres at a cocktail party.
 - † In suburban Chicago in a large buttoned-down church, God-made-flesh was involved, but contained, cubed, and carefully distributed. To be sure, it was a scary ritual, but only because I was afraid of dropping the huge silver communion cup holders as they were passed.

- † The first time I had communion with real, yeasty bread, and yes, real wine, I felt more than a little uncomfortable. The entire experience was too intimate, too odd, too fleshy. But I will never forget it.
- † After Jesus said, “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh,” his listeners immediately asked “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Wouldn’t you have asked the same thing?
- † Just before this Jesus had said, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you will not live.” For so many of us, following Jesus is about what we believe, and so we’d rather think about Jesus than take his life into ours.
- † But that’s not what he wants from us. As one writer says, “Jesus is not content to live inside our minds. ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.’ John’s gospel suggests that it is not enough to understand Jesus (as if we ever could).
- † Even belief in him may be insufficient. Jesus wants to move out of our minds and into our mouths, into our lives in a very real and even startling way.”
- † This writer, Matt Fitzgerald, goes on to say, “I once worked as a support person for a group of developmentally disabled men who all had their own apartments. I helped them run errands, fill prescriptions, make dinner. In my first week of work I walked a client home and stood in the doorframe as he entered.
- † He invited me in for a Coke. I declined, and he invited me again. I said no, and he repeated himself. After four invitations, he took offense. “Come in!” he shouted. “I’ve got more pop than you can handle!” I backed away, unnerved. He never invited me again. We

- did not become friends. Years later I regret having rejected his hospitality, unhinged as it might have been.”
- † “But I hear it echoed in Jesus’ insistence that we eat his flesh and drink his blood. He says it over and over—seven times in these seven verses, and though Christ may have more blood than I can handle, more flesh than I can imagine, he will never stop issuing the invitation. He will give it again and again our whole lives long.”
 - † And he keeps on giving it—this gift that keeps on giving. How will we respond? With caution or with gusto? Have you read the book Year of Wonders by Geraldine Brooks? It’s listed in *Newsweek’s* recent compilation of books we ought to read for the way we live now.
 - † A wonderful historical novel about the relationship between faith and science as well as spiritual sacrifice, the book takes place in a Derbyshire village in 17th century England—the time of the bubonic plague. Torn between understanding the plague as God’s punishment for the sins of the village and trying to develop ways of containing the plague and healing it with science, the book perhaps presages another potential controversy surrounding Jesus’ words “eat my flesh and drink my blood.”
 - † It was only a matter of time, I suppose, until the church addressed a twenty-first century concern about a plague of a different type. In a recent article titled, “Swine Flu, Hygiene, and Holy Communion,” Daniel Benedict and Taylor Burton-Edwards, experts on worship from the national United Methodist church, offer suggestions for handling concerns about the spread of Swine Flu where you worship.

- † Churches, pastors, and congregations, the article says, ought to be concerned about hygiene—both perceived and actual—in a time of fear about contagious disease. Handwashing, staying away from church if you’re sick, and common sense are advised.
- † The final paragraph is instructive: “Certainly the conclusion we come to should not be that being together is dangerous or that Communion should be suspended or relegated to infrequent celebration. After all, receiving Communion has a much lower risk of spreading infection than shaking hands does! The conclusion should be that God calls us together to be the body of Christ around Word and Table and that we can do so with confidence that we will taste and see the goodness of the Lord.”
- † Amen to that. Of course we will be very careful and wash our hands before communion, especially if we’re thoughtful and remember, and especially because there are some of our brothers and sisters whose immune system is severely compromised already.
- † But I can’t help but think of offering Holy Communion, the body and blood of Jesus, at the assisted living facility and nursing home here in Whitefish. Nothing about it is hygienic. Shaky and uncertain lips drip with grape juice. Sometimes someone grabs the cup and drinks lustily from it. Someone dips their whole fist into the cup.
- † But there is no place I would rather be in those moments. Just last week, I was reminded of how earthy and poignant Jesus’ command about taking him into our lives could be. One woman, totally deaf, had sat silent and unresponsive until I offered her, with Anna’s help, the bread and cup.

- † “Oh, how I love Jesus!” she brightened up with a loud voice, after receiving the elements. At the Springs, a sweet man cheerfully said, “Bottoms Up!” as I dipped the bread into the cup and ate my piece of Jesus.
- † John’s gospel does not feature the familiar scene at the Last Supper. There are no words of institution, no instructions to remember Jesus in a gentle memorial meal. Instead we get this odd, insistent passage. “It’s as if John were saying to us, ‘Imagine how your relationship to God would change if you swallowed your embarrassment and your inhibition in order to swallow nothing less than the flesh and blood of Christ himself.
- † Imagine what would happen if his blood washed away all of your timidity, if you drank his love without reserve, if you left church with a piece of Jesus stuck between your teeth.” So writes Matt Fitzgerald with an edge to his words.
- † God so loved the world that God poured and pours out God’s very life, very self, for our sake—not because we were so perfect, but because we were hungry and thirsty and dying, and God made us to share God’s wholeness, love, and eternal life.
- † Paul said that for us a new kind of fullness is possible. “Don’t get drunk with wine”—Don’t consider yourself a giant appetite to be satisfied...but be filled with the Spirit. The fullness of the Spirit comes only when we are emptied of all the ego and self-preoccupation that promises so much and delivers so little.
- † This is the Spirit that Jesus was so full of that the life came spilling out of him as well. There is more than enough of Jesus than we can

handle. And surely more than we can ever understand. But this is a Holy Mystery.

† Why not let go of your resistance and echo the words of our friends at the nursing homes? Taste and see that the Lord is good. Taste how much you love Jesus. Bottoms up! Amen.

Sources:

John Ortberg, “Don’t Be Ridiculous” <http://www.religiononline.org>

Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, <http://theolog.org>

Daniel Benedict and Taylor Burton-Edwards, “Swine Flu, Hygiene, and Holy Communion,” <http://www.gbod.org/worship>

Matt Fitzgerald, “Living by the Word,” *Christian Century*, August 11, 2009.