

“Flesh and Blood”

John 6:35, 41-58

August 12, 2018 – Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Today is the third in our series about Jesus – the Bread of Life. Today’s lesson opens where we left off last week, with Jesus declaring “I am the bread of life.” This is one of seven “I am” saying of Jesus in the Gospel of John: “I am the light of the world; I am the door; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, and the truth and the life; I am the true vine”; and here, “I am the bread of life.” These “I AM” sayings are significant, not only from their metaphoric perspective, but also because the very words “I AM” are a declaration of divinity.

It was in Exodus 3, when Moses received God’s call from the burning bush, that Moses asked, “When I am asked who sent me, what should I say?” And God replied, “I AM who I AM. . . Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14) Indeed the sacred name of God, Yahweh, is derived from the Hebrew for “I AM.”

And so we read that, on Jesus declaration, the Jewish leaders, began to complain, and that’s an understatement. The legalistic Jews of the first century did not take kindly to someone claiming to be God. This was considered the height of blasphemy. And so they respond, “Is this not Joseph’s son? Do we not know his mother and father? How can he now say, “I have come down from heaven?” Now, of course, the Jewish leadership was half right. Without getting into major Christological issues of Mary’s conception by the Holy Spirit, we can all accept that Jesus was born of Mary; and, one of the major dogma’s of the Christian Church is the Jesus was fully human and fully divine. (Oh, and a word of definition. We sometimes use that word “dogma” in a negative sense. To say that someone is dogmatic, is often not a compliment. But the word “dogma” simply means doctrine that is not subject to change; doctrine that is “cast in stone.”) So to say that Jesus was fully human and fully divine is dogma. Within the Christian Church it’s not subject to theological debate. It is accepted as fact. Thus, the Jews got it half right – the fully human part.

Still, in the I AM sayings, Jesus was declaring the fully divine part. Remember the beginning of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . And the word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1,14) Indeed our doctrine teaches that Jesus always existed as one of the three persons of God. The Holy Trinity was not born on Christmas or on Pentecost. The Holy Trinity always existed. What happened that first Christmas was what we call the incarnation – the Spirit of God taking on human form. I’ve said it before, in what I somewhat tongue-in-cheek call “the

Gospel according to Rev. Mark.” In the person of Jesus, God said, “Okay, if you won’t come to me, I’ll come to you.” And God took on human form to live with us, to walk with us, to teach us, to heal us, and ultimately to die for us only to rise again to a newness of life with the promise to be with us always, even to the end of the age. Friends that the Good News of the Gospel.

But let’s get back to the feeding. Think back to our communion service last week. You know the liturgy: “This is my body, broken for you. . . This is my blood, shed for you.” And here, Jesus says, “You must eat my flesh and drink my blood.” Sounds kinda’ gruesome. Are you aware that opponents of the first century church accused Christians of cannibalism – they eat flesh and drink blood. It was a United Methodist Bishop that told me, “I find a very strange dichotomy in Communion. On one hand, I absolutely love the sacrament; while, on the other hand if find the whole idea of eating flesh and drinking blood repulsive.”

I remember once, several years ago, after having celebrated the sacrament, a member of the congregation who happened to be a physician asked, “Rev. Mark, you prayed that the bread and wine would become for us the body and blood of Christ. Do you really believe that.” “Well, on a spiritual level, yes, I do – on a spiritual level. I’m not going to simply say that the bread and juice are symbols. It’s more than that. I believe there is a spiritual change; but it’s spiritual, not physical.” The doctor responded, “Well it doesn’t taste like blood.” I’m not sure he ever really understood my distinction between spirit and physical matter.

But why. . . Why did Jesus give us this sacrament of Flesh and Blood? I just said it – “Flesh and Blood.” Have you ever heard someone referred to as “my flesh and blood.” Generally, when we refer to someone as “flesh and blood,” we mean that they are close family, usually a child or maybe a parent; they are just like us; we are one with each other.

Remember my favorite line in the entire communion liturgy: “By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” That’s the meaning of communion, the oneness. And by eating the spiritual flesh and blood, we reaffirm that we are indeed flesh and blood, one with Christ; and it’s that oneness with Christ, that oneness with the Spirit of the living God that insures us life, life in this world and life everlasting.

Now, having said all this, I need to address what might be interpreted as an exclusionary nature in John’s Gospel. Indeed Jesus seems to indicate in these verses that only through partaking in a Christian sacrament can we receive eternal life. I’ve preached before about the verse in the fourteenth chapter of John’s Gospel that states: “The only way to the father is through me.” Sounds very exclusionary; and, people ask me about this verse far more than any other verse in the entire Bible. But I’m going to leave a discussion about that until next week, when we will consider Jesus as “the way.” Today, let me simply say that, if Jesus

was about anything he was about inclusiveness. I don't believe that Jesus would exclude anyone based simply on their particular doctrine.

Now, make no mistake about this. I am profoundly Christian. I believe that the Christian understanding of God as triune – Father, Son, and Spirit is far superior, far more meaningful, far more relational, far more loving than any other religion. And I openly express that belief every chance I get. But I also respect the beliefs of others, particularly if they are loving, caring people; and I believe that the Holy One accepts these loving, caring people regardless of their particular choice of worship.

Still, as a Christian, I absolutely love the sacrament of Holy Communion. Yes, I will go out of my way to partake in the sacrament. Given my choice, we would include Holy Communion in our worship service every Sunday. (We don't do that because of the challenges – challenges in preparation and challenges in service time.) Why do I love Holy Communion? Because, when I dine on the Spiritual Body and Blood of Christ, I am reminded in a very real way that I am Christ's flesh and blood. He is my flesh and blood; and, indeed, I am flesh and blood with every other person on the planet.

As we meet here today, there are those meeting in other places that would take exception to my calling all people "flesh and blood." Still, I find that statement not only ethical and moral but also biblical. And so I pray. I pray for peace and love and acceptance. And I speak out against hatred and bigotry and prejudice. I pray that God's love will truly enter the hearts of all people. May we never forget we are all "flesh and blood" together in Christ; and may we give God all the praise and all the glory.

Let us pray. . .

Lord we thank you for your eternal presence with us.
We thank you for the reminder that we are all flesh and blood,
flesh and blood with you, and flesh and blood with your people everywhere.
From that reminder, may will live in love for you and for all people.
Amen.

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