

August 15, 2021 - Pentecost 12

Take. Eat. Chomp. Munch. Crunch. Nosh and get Jesus' bodily flesh stuck between your teeth.

If Jesus' metaphor makes us uncomfortable, then good. That's fine with him. If it's not fine with us, well, we might have bitten off a bit more than we are willing to chew.

Calling himself bread is a little strange but it's a familiar and a little easier message to work with. But equating the staple of a sustainable diet with human flesh, that's a little more ... icky.

John tells us Jesus' words were then as now, tough to swallow. But I will give those who questioned Jesus on this, - - simply referred to in the text as "the Jews," -- this: they wrestled with these words. They disputed their meaning among themselves, we are told, and the tenor of that discussion tended toward the skeptical. How indeed?

But Jesus himself is Jewish. He stands not in contrast with these people but among them. They are his people. Before we ever were. And in the Jewish tradition, this is how the word of God is honored. It is deeply considered. It is valued enough to be discussed, to be argued, to be taken seriously with regard to what it means as one lives out their life.

One of the greatest challenges we face in our time as we seek after Jesus' truth, his way and his life, is how we dispute among ourselves. About three and a half years ago, a political commentator and activist and a confessing evangelical Christian wrote a tweet that rapidly went viral: "Being taught to avoid talking about politics and religion has led to a lack of understanding of politics and religion. What we should have been taught was how to have a civil conversation about a difficult topic."

That little nugget of wisdom came from someone I don't agree with much about politics and undoubtedly have a different perspective from on the Christian religion. I shared it when I came across it some time -- at least several months -- later. Thousands of people did. And the original thread of replies generated this response: "First time you earned my Like (a token of respect). Civility means respecting the decent human impulses of the other person, no matter how difficult it is to understand their position." To which the original poster said, "Glad we agree on something."

Now I wish I could tell you this continued on as a fruitful dialogue. It would make for a better story and perhaps back up my point better. But no ... scroll down and it devolves into accusations and character attacks and personal insults pretty rapidly after that.

We just aren't very good at this. And it shows.

So what do we do?

There are many things to which we belong. Let's start with ourselves ... anybody ever have an argument with yourself? Some us have. Maybe not all but I know I have.

We are part of a family. A family of origin. A family of our choosing, perhaps. And families fight. In some ways healthier than others.

We live as part of a town. Part of a state. Part of a country. The politics of each and all are a challenge. Sometimes we choose to disengage. Sometimes we must. But we have the *capacity* to do better than we have.

We can belong to a congregation. We can belong to the church, capital-C, the body of Christ stretched out all over the world. And you may have noticed within the church, big or small, we don't always see eye to eye.

But just as Jesus and those who considered his words shared a common framework for understanding and navigating the world they lived in -- in the form of the Jewish faith -- we share with other Christians a foundation of faith in Jesus. As the writer Beth Moore puts it, within the body of Christ, there are spine issues and there are rib issues. The backbone of our faith are those things that make us Christian. We recite them in the Creed, for instance. We believe Jesus was both God and man. That he died on the Cross and rose from the tomb. In the mystery and beauty of the trinitarian nature of God.

But then the rib issues are the things we don't always agree on with other Christians, but it doesn't make us "not-Christian" when we do differ. The mode, the "how," of Jesus' presence in Holy Communion, for example. Whether infant baptism is OK or believer's baptism is necessary. Whether it's better to sing along with organ music or guitar-and-

drums at worship. Whether we will have same-sex marriages in our church or women or LGBT people in our pulpits.

And those are all things that have led to divisions in the church. Sometimes amicable and healthy but more often ... not. But when we can come back from the ribs and remember the backbone we share, and rejoice in that, then we can have more meaty, substantive discourse over those ribs.

We have an opportunity as church to be distinct in this world in the way we interact with one another and demonstrate the uniqueness of living with Jesus Christ present in our lives. Doing that -- learning how to become better at that among ourselves and then taking that beyond into other areas of interaction in our lives -- means our relationship with Jesus happens on *his* terms. Even if those terms do shock us and make us uncomfortable.

When Jesus heard the dispute among his hearers about what this whole “eat my flesh” thing, he doubled down. In Greek, he uses different words. At first, yes, something more akin to eat, as in “dine upon.” *That* troubles the crowd. But when questioned, he reiterates what he is saying with another word, “*trogo*,” which is like to crunch, to chew, that onomatopoeia, vivid, devour-as-if-your-life depends upon it kind of eating.

Because Jesus is looking for us to have that kind of experience of him. Raw, fleshy, gritty ... real. Messy. Without apology. He became human because God would go to any length and reach to any depth to be with us, even if it meant taking on a body with all its uncomfortableness and ickiness. Jesus *wanted* that.

And in his words we have heard today, we hear that he wants us to experience, in his body and his blood, *true* food and *true* drink. TRUE. Something vivid for which there is no

substitute. Once you and I have had what is true, what is real, we aren't meant to settle for anything less. Sustenance for becoming our true selves as God made us to be.

And the meal we share is just the beginning. We sink our teeth into Jesus and we get messy. For God's sake and for the sake of a better world. When we're not shy about coming back for seconds and thirds and more, when we are *filled* with the Bread of Life from Heaven, we live in a true and powerful way. That's how I want to live with you, church. And how Jesus is calling us all to live with Him. Amen.