

10th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.15.21

Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

John 6:51-58

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my **flesh**.” The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 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. Those who **eat** my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever **eats** me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who **eats** this bread will live forever.” (288)

I was joining up with some colleagues to create a clergy group. This was a number of years ago. We were spending our first of the monthly meetings creating a covenant. This was a statement of the terms by which we were gathering and to which we were agreeing, our intentions about the group and our expectations of ourselves and one another.

We’re an earnest lot, we clergy.

One of us suggested we say something about always bringing “our best selves” to our meetings.

“Oh, no,” I said, spontaneous. Then I had to explain it: “I don’t think I can promise that. I think most of the time I’ll bring my regular old self.”

Did I mention we were aiming to meet monthly? My best self isn’t necessarily something I’ve got on offer so frequently. I reserve her for weddings and funerals and, ideally, Sunday mornings, but even that’s a lot to hope for. The rest of the time, I do what I can, but it isn’t usually the best version of me. And the whole point of a clergy group is to have a place where you’re working toward excellence but not necessarily manifesting excellence and that’s okay with everyone.

As it happens, this is also okay with Jesus, at least according to what he had to say this morning.

In fact, he seems to be encouraging that we bring our worst selves, our inner beasts.

If this reading grossed you out a bit, you're not alone and you're not out of line. It grossed out some at the Bible study this week, sounded monstrous, sounded like talk of zombies, vampires: "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." It also disgusted some of the earliest hearers, from whom we'll hear in next week's gospel lection. "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" they said, and because of this many of his disciples turned their back and no longer went about with him.

It seems it might also turn off some translators, as most translations of this text don't make anything of the fact that Jesus changed his own wording here. The translation is consistent that Jesus spoke in terms of "eating." But the Greek original would have us understand he changed from speaking in terms of eating to speaking in terms of chewing, feeding, or gnawing, something that tends to be associated with how animals eat. From *phagein* to *trogein*, Jesus is in the transliteration by David Bentley Hart recognized to have gone from saying, "Amen, amen, I tell you, if you do not *eat* the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in you," to saying, "Whoever *feeds* upon my flesh and drinks my blood has life in the Age to come and I will raise him up in the last day."

Trogein shows up six times in the New Testament. Four of those times are here in this 6th chapter of the Gospel of John, this section of Jesus' talk of himself as the bread of life. We're moving slowly through this chapter, five weeks considering it, now on week four. Four of those times are here—*trogein*, *trogein*, chewing, gnawing. The others are in reference to something untoward happening. In one, it describes Judas' manner of eating at the Last Supper just prior to when he would betray Jesus. The other, in the Gospel of Matthew, is to describe the sort of eating people did in the age before Noah. As if an indulging of appetites, this might have contributed to God's decision to destroy the world with a flood, to destroy it all and start again clean, new—an indulging of appetites, people and their devouring appetites, people and their (okay, *our*) devouring ways.

If God is as the bush burning though unconsumed, we are by contrast consuming, devouring, leaving behind us a trail of exhaust and waste. We these days are even *called* consumers in common parlance—and we don't even flinch at being called that.

See, things didn't play out much better after that mythic flood than before. Consider what's said in the twenty-seventh psalm of "when evildoers assail me to devour my flesh..." Here, as

elsewhere, it speaks of someone or something that delights in the destruction or death of someone else. Triumph! King of the hill! Sure, it's a hill of ash...

Would that this had been washed away with that mythic flood.

Jesus seems here to be inviting that devouring upon himself. He seems here to be inviting that destroying upon himself, as if intending to be himself the thing we destroy.

That we would destroy him, or at least that *people* would destroy him, is something the first hearers of this story would have known. John's audience, his earliest audience, people of late in the 1st century or early in the 2nd, would have known this was how it would play out, with people in the crowds of Jerusalem yelling to Pontius Pilate, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" But the *characters* in the story, here in the 6th chapter of John's gospel, would have had no thought of this. It simply hadn't come up yet in this gospel, indeed wouldn't until very late. In the other gospel narratives, in the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Jesus' talking of the crucifixion comes up about halfway through. But not in this one, not in the Gospel of John. No one here, where he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, would have had the faintest inkling that destruction and death was on the horizon. This might have been where began the impulse among the religious authorities to turn him over to the imperial authorities that they might do their worst. But that wasn't even a fully formed idea. Not yet.

Can you imagine not knowing? Try.

I remember hearing about a church congregation that a young family had joined up with, the eight-year-old girl in the Sunday school. She had liked the Sunday school, had liked the stories of Jesus, liked the other children in the mix. She had liked Jesus, who was said to have liked talking with children and talking about sheep and seeds and things.

But then Lent rolled around, and talk of Jesus turned from him going around healing sick people and telling strange stories to him getting killed on the cross, and she was shocked. "They killed him? Why'd they kill him?" It was like a real-time return to its original playing out, this most historical religion whose founding events are situated very much in history as happening to people understood very much to be real, and very much caught off guard by how it would all end—or *seem* to end.

At this point in the Gospel of John no one had thought in these terms. Yet here was Jesus speaking as if such a thing was not only what *would* happen, but what *should* happen, something we should even participate in—a relishing in his destruction and death. "Those who gnaw on 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. Those who crunch my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever devours me will live because of me.”

It’s been forever that people who’ve paid close attention have wondered what on earth Jesus was driving at here. It’s been forever that people have wondered why the raw, visceral, grotesque rhetoric. So please don’t expect that I’ll have a definitive explanation here, I’ll have something to say that will make this make sense. I won’t. I don’t.

Not long ago, Tobias asked me if I thought we were good. “No,” I said, a plaintive admission. I mean, how could we be? Given all we participate in, from racial injustice to ecological devastation to militarism of the sort whose effect we’re seeing play out bitterly in Afghanistan this week alone, damned if we do and damned if we don’t, how could we possibly consider ourselves good? Not to mention how irritated I get when people drive like fools or park in the middle of Church Street [in Lenox]. Believe me, I am not good.

This, though civilization has placed me, and us in such a way that we could think so of ourselves, that we could be blind to so much brutality done for our benefit. Indeed, civilization is itself an arrangement that would blind us to so much brutality done. In fact, some people argue this is its true purpose. What the Belgians did in the Congo in the name of civilizing the savage was far worse savagery than anything the Congolese ever thought up. It was just done in a beige suit. Civilization is to put off out of sight that which we deem unsightly but absolutely rely on, to put off out of our sight our also essential grotesquerie.

It was really important to Hitler that the Nazis have impressive uniforms. It was really important that they *look* good. This while they burned books and then burned bodies, this while they stole art and then bombed the cities that gave such art rise.

It was important to Jesus, or so it seems here, that those who believe in him recognize themselves in what looks bad, in what sounds bad—this while taking care in how to live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

I had a friend whose church of her youth featured a passion play every Good Friday. On this day commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus, two days prior to his resurrection, her congregation would gather and act it all out, or at least perform the lines—someone playing Peter’s part of denying knowing Jesus, someone playing the women’s parts of watching it all from a distance but never running away, many playing the part of the crowd: “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

She always wanted to play that part. It didn't feel good, exactly, to play that part, but it did feel honest, it did feel true. Catharsis, it seems: a clearing out and cleaning out of pent-up emotion—frustration, fear, resentment, wrath. It's as if, knowing the power of such pent-up emotion, Jesus urged us: "Take that out on me. Exhaust it with me." It's as if, recognizing the power of destruction such things have—frustration, fear, resentment, wrath—Jesus offered himself as one who could take it, one who *would* take it, and not return it in kind. Because, really, when it comes to whether you'll survive, or that other person will—the one whose very being comes as a threat to you, the one whose very presence disturbs the structures that keep you safe—who are you to say you wouldn't choose you, yourself, your own survival, saving your own skin? I mean, maybe you wouldn't. But maybe you would. I hope I'll never have to really find out which it would be for me.

But here, in Jesus, is someone on whom you can turn traitor, and who will return to you with this to say, "Peace." Here is someone whose death you can resort to, if not delight in, and who will return to you alive—though murdered, alive—with this: "Receive the Holy Spirit. As the Father sent me, so I send you."

It's a lovely day, during this lovely season, as it always is when this lection comes up—some August Sunday every three years. It never comes as a joy to preach, so the best thing to do is to get to the point and keep it short. The fact is the news has been very hard to take these days. That's at least how it's felt to me. The state of the world in nearly all manner of speaking is woeful, woeful indeed. We must be careful how we live—not reactive, not unmoored, not afraid. There's little else we can do about a lot of our troubles than this: being kind, not returning evil for evil, taking care about how we live and how we live together.

It might also help to be faithful, that Jesus, whom we gather to hear and to hear of, is powerful to save beyond what we might easily imagine or freely admit. We're in dire straits. But we've been in dire straits before. Meanwhile, Jesus continues to speak, has long continued to come to us in peace and in offering the Holy Spirit.

So, come, and bring your worst, this which might be the first in you to receive the love of God, to sense the redeeming power of Jesus.

Come, and do your worst, and be loved.

Thanks be to God.