

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 12, 2018,
AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

I have a cousin who just started a new job as a hospital transient care nurse. The other day she posted this on her Facebook account. "Regulations here at St. Mary's require a wheelchair for patients being discharged. However, while working as a nurse on a new floor, I found one elderly gentleman already dressed and sitting on the bed with a suitcase at his feet—who insisted he didn't need my help to leave the hospital. After a chat about rules being rules, he reluctantly let me wheel him to the elevator.

On the way down I asked if his wife was meeting him. "I don't know," he said. "She's still upstairs in the bathroom changing out of her hospital gown."ⁱ Sometimes it's difficult to know what your next move should be. Take the case of Jesus in this morning's gospel. In this chapter alone from John, he's already been at both sides of the lake, through the lakeside towns, walked on water, been to the mountaintop, tried to take some time off and now is confronted yet again but this time by a new group, one whom John calls "the Jews," and they want more from him. Jesus had already explained in last week's gospel reading that he is the "more," in fact he is actually the "bread of life," contrary to the bread miracle that fills them up.ⁱⁱ And yet even more, he states in a kind of caveat at the end of the text that he is the living bread of life.

He continues to explain to them who he is and how belief in him means that believers will never die but have eternal life...

This is a lot of belief talk for these past few weeks. Do you as congregants of a Disciples Church spend any time asking yourself “how much do I believe?” and if you do, is it more of a specific nature (“like I believe in the Virgin birth” or “I don’t believe that three Kings came to visit Jesus”)? Can you believe parts of it without believing all of it? What does belief in Jesus as the living bread of life entail?

First, it means that he is our daily spiritual food; in fact, he is the only spiritual food that allows us to take the journey forever into the world that is come. If it be important to us that there be an eternal life that we will live with God and our loved ones, it can only be accomplished through a relationship with him. No other religion or group offers this relationship with God, and he (Jesus) is a pathway to God. To the average Jew of Jesus’ day this made no sense. After all they had Moses the great lawgiver, as well as the prophets who looked after them and with whom God had made a covenant to be their God and the Jews God’s people. What Jesus was now telling them (Moses did not give you the manna in the wilderness, God did) and the fact that the manna was only a temporary fix (not eternal life) was a great blow to their nationalistic ego. And going further, he tells them he is the living, active bread of life, the word of God,

replacing what they had believed about Moses and replacing it all with him.ⁱⁱⁱ In a kind of Clint Eastwood type of move, he says I am the new sheriff in town, and things are going to be different.

The theologian David de Pra writes, "It can be a difficult realization for some people, but it is the Truth: Christianity is not a religion. It is not a list of doctrines to believe in. It is not even a religion which grew of out an inspired Word of God.

Christianity is a relationship with a Person. It is a redemptive experience with God through Jesus Christ. It is the result of what happens when God comes down and makes himself one with man."^{iv}

This is part of what Jesus was trying to say in this portion of the gospel. He in effect tells the Jewish religious authorities that no matter what their religious experience might be, none are as good as what he has to offer. And what he offers is his own flesh and blood.

The crowds had a hard time with this. They could not understand how he might mean anything other than the thought that he was asking them to consume, literally, his own flesh and blood when he was actually speaking in a spiritual manner, in an allegorical or metaphorical sense. It's no surprise that they would have trouble here. No religious Jew would ever eat the flesh of another human being. The entire Protestant Reformation was centered on what Jesus meant when he said, "take; eat," etc. with words like transubstantiation and consubstantiation thrown in with the mix. (You may remember these from Sunday school days or Adult classes...) Protestants of the 16th and later centuries went so far as to proclaim that Roman Catholics were espousing a doctrine of cannibalism with their eat-my-flesh theology. (Far from it but one can see the temptations to lean in that direction.)

For us to understand what Jesus said, we only need look

forward to the words of explanation that Jesus uses himself: "He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood, dwells in Me, and I in him." All of him becomes one with us. Thus when he talks about becoming one with us, he is describing a complete integration of His being with ours. This is important to our spiritual wellbeing because it means that no matter where we are or who we've become, Christ is still with us in every step. In fact he is so much a part of us that he is even all that we consume and experience. We in turn experience all that has transpired with him which we express by our baptism and our weekly communion with him. So our communion is more than a community meal - - it is a reuniting of our self with Jesus and we both benefit from it - - he by having the flock gathered to him, we by coming to him to receive all the benefits of who we are as sheep being cared for by an omnipotent shepherd.

Thus we see just what Christianity is. Christianity is not a list of doctrines to believe in. It is a relationship with a living Savior. It is not "joining a church." It is joining with Jesus Christ, the true Bread which has come down from heaven.^v

So, the question I'd like to raise this morning is "what are you eating?" You just never know what's in a person's diet. I can recall years ago a friend of mine, Jeffrey, was so broke that he managed to open the altar guild's closet and was helping himself to the little pressed wafers we used for communion. I reckon he had gone through about three weeks' worth, plus wine, before we caught up with him. He said it had sustained him, though, and he cited some bible verses as proof of how that might happen along with why he thought he was entitled to them. The director of Gold's Gym in Washington, D.C. has a tree-day apple diet that she swears will give you new life. There are diets using nearly every type and kind of food one could ever imagine, even a wilderness diet focused on whole grain oats, quinoa, granola, powdered soy milk, pasta, brown rice, cereals, and starchy vegetables. I doubt that, unless you are following Jeffrey's motives, you have much reason to proclaim that what you are eating (or not) has religious ramifications, unless you adhere to no meat on Fridays and on Ash Wednesday. Many Christians do not eat bread or fish anytime during Holy Week. If you are one of these folks, it means you probably have stopped to ponder the importance

of the day and Jesus' connection to it. On those days most churches have a sacramental liturgy that matches the theme or lessons for the day. But what about the rest of the year? I don't know how it was for you growing up, but in my parents' household one was expected to be present (if you were in town or did not have to work) for Sunday afternoon dinner, usually between 2 and 4, depending on the occasion. This was particularly important for Hallmark holidays such as Mother's Day and one's birthday. Though we always had a blessing at the meal, we rarely gave God or Jesus much more thought (other than thinking "thank God my sister did not bring that lettuce, peas, and pearl onion casserole again this year!") One Thanksgiving I got the entire family to go around the table and to say something for which they were grateful with some pretty amazing results (other than my nephews whom I recall said "yeah – what she said" as their response.)

It got me to thinking about why we prayed at meals and if there were any benefit to us doing so. I concluded that it was important to acknowledge the community aspect of the meal (the same as we do on Sunday's at the Lord's Table.") I also wanted to give thanks that we always, even during lean years, had what I considered to be a fine looking bounty spread before us. And finally I always wanted to give some words of appreciation to the cook(s) for their ingenuity, hard work, and for getting everything there in one piece (someday I'll tell you the story about flying cheesecake due to an impending car accident, but not today. Suffice it to say that it required an entire change of clothes for several

passengers and the dogs had a feast day!) This is why we can't say that Jesus is the bread of life and in us and mean that literally, but spiritually he would have appreciated all the laughter and goodwill the meal engendered.

Because, and I want to be clear about it here, it's not about the food. I've seen many of my brethren and sisters clergy use their sermon this Sunday to speak about the hungry and homeless. But that's not it! It's about the spirit of God being present in all that we do. That might require that we look at every occasion, every staff meeting, every conference round table, every drive in the car, every everything as if Jesus were present with us. That doesn't mean we have to be more polite than usual, (although our brother and sister legislators

in the nation's capital could take a note here), but we sure could be more civil to one another. And we could take more time to see that everyone has a place at the table, and that all feel that they have been heard and fed. And above all, we need to feel that we are worthy of sitting down at the table.

ⁱ <https://www.rd.com/joke/wrong-patient-joke/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1406

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.goodnewsarticles.com/Mar99-2.htm>

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

Each week I invite everyone who is present to come forward and receive communion with us. I do it not because it is a kindness, but because all are worthy. So join us, and learn why we say we should never be able to remember a time we were not welcome at God's table. Come claim your place. It has been waiting for you since the day you were born, and through the Bread of Life it now calls you home.

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