

# A Sermon by Teresa Ramsey

August 26, 2018



## Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Good morning fellow Seekers and visitors. Usually when I have an occasion to share the word, I share from the perspective of teaching something I learned that I think would be helpful to the fellowship. I thought I would do that this time. I planned to keep notes as Will and I traveled across the country this summer. I was certain that there would be inspiration along the way. Instead, what I heard when I prayed was that I was to learn instead of teaching. What I was to learn would be in the scripture readings. Okay, I could do that I thought. Then I got to the lectionary and read the gospel for today. I must say that as I read it, I felt that I had drawn a short straw. This gospel is complicated with many huge core themes.....Jesus identity, man's purpose and the roles within the trinity, to name a few, to add the cherry on top, Jesus commands us to "eat my flesh, drink my blood." Unlike

some of you, I cannot connect to the Holy One using my mind, only with my heart. How can I feel my way through this? But I have surrendered and will do my best.

For the past several weeks we have had the gospel reading from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. The Chapter begins with a huge crowd following Jesus across the lake. The huge crowd was fed by Jesus in the miracle of the loaves and fishes. The crowd wanted the blessings that Jesus provided. But Jesus sensed that the crowd sought Him for the wrong reasons. "Truly, truly I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." John 6:26-27. Today we read the final verses of Chapter 6 and find that although the enthusiastic crowd that followed Jesus wanted more "bread from heaven", they did not want the kind that Jesus came to give. The Chapter doesn't end well.

The historical pre-cursor of today's story is the story of the Israelites in the desert following the Passover and the flight from Egypt. The Israelites in the original manna story initially rejoiced at the triumph of God in Exodus, but they quickly began to grumble against God and Moses in the wilderness. They did not trust God to care for them and questioned God's provision of food, water and safety. When Jesus begins to test the crowd to see if they believed in Him, He made statements that sounded very strange. He said that He was the true bread from heaven and whoever eats this bread would live forever. He said that "And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh'" John 6:51. This sounded like cannibalism and his listeners balked. Although the crowd likes the idea of Jesus as one who, like Moses, could provide this miraculous bread, they reject the idea of identifying Jesus with manna, by responding with grumbling just as the Israelites had.

Belief in the face of a seeming lack of logical content is a challenge that we all face. I ask that you help me demonstrate this. I have asked Will to distribute index cards to each of you. I invite you to reflect about a question that you would like to ask God. I think that many of us want an explanation from God about something we don't understand. You know, the really big questions like... why did the Holy one not stop the holocaust? or Why did my Godly best friend have to suffer cancer? Or Why was Donald Trump elected? If you have any questions you wish God would answer, please write one down on the index card. When you are done, please pass your cards to the aisle. I have asked Will to collect them for me.

In the gospel Jesus says "Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." John 6: 53-55 Jesus is clearly declaring his identity and His relationship to the triune God. His words are life, the Holy Spirit is the one who gives life, and the Father is the one who brings people to Jesus. For Jesus, eating is believing, drinking is believing. These statements are hard to understand and one must have faith to accept them.

This is the point at which there is a division between those who believe and those who do not. The reading makes clear that unbelief was found not only among "them" (the Jews in the synagogue) but among us and within us (the disciples)! Many of Jesus own disciples, those who had followed him for some time and had just witnessed the miracle of the loaves and fishes, walked away and deserted Jesus over these declarations, finding them too "hard."

Although Jesus knew what the disciples were grumbling about, rather than explain further, Jesus asks the Twelve whether

they want to go also. We could ask this of ourselves as well. John points to the cross as the way that Jesus returns to the Father. Jesus call is a difficult call and one which many may seek to avoid.

We humans put a lot of stock in our brains. We think we can figure things out for the most part. We demand explanations for things. We want the facts. But there are some things that we may be unable to fully grasp with our human brains. We are not entitled to explanations from God even if we could grasp them. But still we wonder. Let me read a few of these cards for examples of things we wonder about.....

Just what does Jesus mean when he says "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." Apart from the life that Jesus offers, we are dead. He offers both eternal life, resurrection in the future as well as promising a new quality of life now. The eating and drinking has to do with shared life, mutual indwelling. Jesus' words are referring to something that could not be understood until after his death, resurrection, and the coming of the Spirit. Jesus is speaking of his death and the shared life that His death will make possible. The focus of this teaching is on sacrifice and shared life. But the crowd could not have known this and walked away.

The real question for us is whether given the unanswered questions, the mysteries of faith, will we walk away or will we stay with Jesus? Will we be able to abide in the long road of discipleship even though the teachings are difficult, or do we lose interest and fall away? Perhaps, our unanswered questions are a part of the cross we must take up to follow Jesus?

The Twelve decided to stay with Jesus. They had been witnesses to enough to know that "You have words of eternal life." To quote Peter at John 6: 68 and believed that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

Judas was one of the 12 who stayed. Judas, however, had knowledge but did not have faith. Knowledge alone is not enough. I have seen this pattern repeated regularly within the AA community. Some people come in and gain the knowledge of how alcoholism works, thinking that knowledge alone will enable them to be abstinent, but it is not. In order to access the power to remain sober, one must have at least a willingness to believe in a power greater than oneself, an open mind if you will. Willingness to believe is the price of admission so to speak.

Jesus also declared: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." John 6: 56. John uses the word for abide 40 times and in almost every chapter. What does this mean? Our purpose in the end is to abide with Jesus, that is to stick closely to Him and listen to His words. Will we abide? To "abide" signifies a long-term commitment. A technical definition for abide is to accept or act in accordance with. The challenge then is to maintain a relationship with Jesus over the long term. How can we maintain this relationship? Keeping the commandments, most notably loving God and our neighbor. Certainly, also through prayer and meditation. In AA we are urged to improve our conscious contact with God through prayer and meditation.

Consider also that there are also ways that we can weaken our relationship with Jesus. Fear blocks the sunlight of the Spirit. Holding on tightly to the world does the same. We seek to fill the void in us, the place that only God can fill, by various means such as alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, eating, materialism and so on. This brings us back full circle to the Bread of Life that Jesus offers us,

It has been said that we are what we eat. That statement refers to our physical selves but isn't it also true of our spirits? What then do we feed our spirits? Scripture? Spiritual reading? Service to others? Prayer? Or is it the news cycle, resentments, anger and fear?

What then is our take-away from today's reading? The summary is that we are to rely completely on God, so completely that we allow God to inhabit the very fiber of our being. We do this in part by feeding on God through scripture, prayer, meditation, and, yes, communion.

In closing, I am reminded of a Cherokee Indian legend that illustrates the most important battle of our lives. An old Cherokee Grandfather is teaching his grandson about life. There is a fight going on inside me, a terrible fight between two wolves, he says. One wolf is evil, he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, shame, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other wolf is good. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, generosity, empathy, truth, compassion and faith. The same fight is going on inside you and inside every other person too. The little boy thought for awhile and asked, "Grandpa, which wolf will win? The old Cherokee simply replied, "the one you feed." I pray that we feed the good within us and that we allow God to inhabit the very fiber of our being. Amen.