

*Jesus, Are You Crazy?*  
John 6.51-58  
Dr. D. William McIvor  
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

### **Introduction to the Morning Lesson**

This is the second of three sermons based on texts from John 6. Last Sunday I asked you all to read this chapter before coming to church. I won't ask for a show of hands to see how many did. But I want you to know that I'm serious when I make suggestions like that. Preaching requires that the preacher be prepared to speak and the people be prepared to hear.<sup>1</sup> One of the best ways to prepare the hearing is by reading the text in advance. So if you didn't read John 6 before coming today, grace abounds. You have another chance to read it before next Sunday's sermon.

Last Sunday I also mentioned that John's Gospel frequently uses the phrase, "the Jews." Unfortunately, this pejorative term has often reinforced the sin of anti-Semitism. So I suggested that when John says "the Jews," we should read ourselves into the text as those who also lack faith or struggle with faith. Then we will have a better chance of hearing what the scriptures are really saying to us. That will be important again today. Let's read it in John 6.

John 6.51-58 (NRSV)

[Jesus said,] "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." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

I want to set alongside the Gospel reading the Epistle reading for today which comes

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<sup>1</sup> The people's participation in the proclamation of the Word is above all to hear: a. to discern Jesus Christ, b. to receive his offered grace, c. to respond to his call with obedience. Such participation depends upon the illumination of the Holy Spirit, which is to be sought earnestly in prayer. The words "hearing" and "heard" are not intended exclusively to mean acts of sensory perception. (Directory for Worship, W-2.2010)

from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, a letter that tries to outline in a grand and organized fashion what it means to live the Christian life.

### 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.

### Introduction

Jesus said, "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 text goes on immediately to say the Jews argued about how Jesus could give his flesh for others to eat.

Who wouldn't argue about something as crazy as that? We would argue too if we didn't have twenty centuries behind us of the practice of communion. Christians have often had vicious arguments about what the Lord's Supper means. Do you realize that almost six centuries ago, the Reformation movement that became Lutheran and the reformation movement that became Presbyterian split because Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli argued about the meaning of the bread and wine in communion? We have been split ever since.<sup>2</sup> But I suspect we just ignore all that arguing. I imagine that we pop communion some Sundays like we pop aspirin or acetaminophen for a headache. We just hardly think about it.

But the Jews were right in arguing about how Jesus could give his body and blood for the world to eat and drink. It sounds bizarre, even cannibalistic. In fact, early Christians were accused of being cannibals because Roman officials heard that Christians ate their god. Of course, the officials misunderstood. Or did they? Were we not so accustomed to it, we might respond as our kids or grandkids would if we emphasized what Jesus literally said. *I have to eat flesh and drink blood. Yuck. Totally gross. No way. Jesus, you're crazy!*

But that's what Jesus said, isn't it? , "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." I think, if we're honest, we have to admit that such teaching makes Jesus sound like a nut case. What possible sense can we make of this teaching?

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<sup>2</sup> D. William McIvor, "The Colloquy of Marburg and 'cuius regio, eius religio,'" *Studia Biblica et Theologica*, V (1975).

### ONE: How do we acknowledge our hunger for God?

I think we can best come at the meaning of Gospel text indirectly through what Paul wrote to the Ephesians. As we noted last Sunday, what Jesus is really talking about in John 6 is our hunger for God. Such hunger is built into us and today's Gospel lesson reinforces that teaching. So the question becomes, how do we acknowledge our hunger for God? Paul's words to the Ephesians can help us answer that.

The Ephesians passage begins, very simply, with these words: "Be careful then how you live." If we're going to be constantly aware of our hunger for God, we need to be careful how you live.

One preacher tells the story of his daughter's baptism. After the pastor had lavishly splashed water on the baby's head, her older sister broke loose from her father's firm grip. With a delighted squeal this five-year-old ran over to her infant sister. Cupping her hands around the baby's head, she announced for all the congregation to hear, "Daddy, Meg's head is wet. She really was baptized."

We who take the Christian faith seriously want to know that every baptism really happens.... Baptism signifies that we belong to God. So how will we know that baptism is real? The answer lies in how we respond to God's grace. What matters to God is not whether our brows are still wet from the baptismal font, but how we shall live after the water has dried.<sup>3</sup> In other words, be careful how you live.

How will we know if we're being careful about how we live? Paul tells us. "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." In other words, don't just live your life as a big appetite to be gratified. Know what you're really hungry for. So, "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."

You see, it isn't just Jesus who sounds crazy. Paul sounds a little crazy too. And yet imagine a world where the CEOs of large corporations would go into the slums and housing projects of their cities and "sing and make melody in their hearts." Imagine if the Israelis and Palestinians spend a day singing psalms and hymns to one another.<sup>4</sup> Or imagine a family you know who is in conflict — maybe your family — giving thanks to God at all times and for everything. Imagine.

Sounds crazy, doesn't it, that our world might actually come to realize that its only real hunger is for God. But then we have to begin to wonder who's really crazy. Is it Jesus? Is it Paul? Or is it this world where we think nothing can change and all we are is a collection of appetites that needs to be filled. I haven't watched *Sesame Street* for awhile but the Cookie Monster's outlook is the outlook of so many: "See cookie. Want cookie. Absorb cookie." And a lot of the smartest people we could know stay up late at night trying to figure out new ways to convince us that if we have more things to see, want, and

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<sup>3</sup> William G. Carter, *No Box Seats in the Kingdom* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 1996) 7.

<sup>4</sup> John Ortberg, "Don't Be Ridiculous," *The Christian Century* 120.16 (2003): 16.

absorb, then we'll be happy.

That's the wisdom of the world. But Jesus says that our only hope of being filled is to be filled with him, to absorb him, to follow in the way of the one who emptied himself and thus became the fullness of all things. See Jesus. Want Jesus. Absorb Jesus.<sup>5</sup> That doesn't sound so crazy when we realize that the alternative is to see, want, and absorb things. Be careful then how you live.

## **TWO: Jesus is our connection to God**

This means that Jesus is our true connection to God. Jesus said, "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." If our real hunger is for God, only absorbing Jesus into the substance of our lives will satisfy us.

Professor Wendy Miller, who teaches at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia, tells how her three-year-old grandson treats new foods as if they were some alien presence on his plate. She sometimes wonders what his little mind is thinking and seeing when his usual congenial and trusting mood is overtaken by doubt and hesitation concerning what is on his plate. She says her daughter and son-in-law are wise, giving him time, space, and permission to eat or not to eat, along with encouragement to try a taste of what is new. Table time becomes a place of grace and hospitality, and in time this little one decides which foods he is ready to eat.

Professor Miller goes on to make the point that in the church, although we work at preparing food for the soul, we cannot make people eat. People gather at the table of the community of faith with all kinds of imaginative ways of seeing what the church offers them as nourishment for the soul. And even if they come hungry, this hunger does not guarantee that they will eat. Finally, the only thing the church has to offer is patient and gracious hospitality: a space where people know they are welcome, along with their doubts and hesitation.<sup>6</sup>

I hope gracious hospitality is the atmosphere of this church, a place where everyone is welcome no matter what, and where we acknowledge that only Jesus — not us, not our music or preaching, not our programs — is the bread of life. Let this church always be a witness that the only real food is Jesus.

Isn't that really why we're here today? We may think we come to church for a lot of reasons but at the root isn't it because we hunger for God and know that only Jesus can satisfy that need? Susan Andrews, the current Moderator of the General Assembly and pastor of the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, MD, tells about one summer when the first week of vacation was at the beach. When Sunday morning came she reveled in the freedom to put her chair in the sand and read the entire morning away.

The second week of vacation they were in the mountains. This time when Sunday morning approached, Susan already had her book and rocking chair picked out. As the

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<sup>5</sup> Ortberg, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Wendy J. Miller, "Ministry as Hospitality," *Lectionary Homiletics* 14.5 (2003): 16.

clock began to tick toward ten o'clock, however, a certain restlessness set in. She says it was almost as if her soul had an appetite and the hunger pangs began at the predictable moment. She realized she simply had to worship.

So she got in the car and drove half an hour to the nearest Presbyterian church. She said the music was odd, the sermon was preachy, and the people were absolutely stunning in their ordinariness. Nonetheless, she left that sanctuary humming and smiling and refreshed, somehow back in sync with God, with herself, with the world.<sup>7</sup> She had felt her hunger and fed it with Jesus, the only food that truly satisfies.

### Conclusion

So we've gathered today. On this hot, heavy Sunday in the doldrums of August, we — unlike 80% of Americans — have chosen to be here. We have chosen to engage in this crazy ritual called worship. We have chosen for an hour to separate ourselves from the world and its crazy teaching to absorb things.<sup>8</sup>

Why have we come? Maybe out of habit or guilt or because someone made us. But I think at a deeper level we've come out of need. We are hungry for God and this is the place where we can find the true food. Jesus said, "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."

Sounds crazy doesn't it? Just crazy enough to be the truest thing of all.

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<sup>7</sup> Susan R. Andrews, "Why Worship?" *Lectionary Homiletics* 14.5 (2003): 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> Andrews, 22-23.