

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost 15 August 2021

Proverbs 9:1-6 / Psalm 34:9-14 / Ephesians 5:15-20 / John 6:51-58

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

We sure have hit the “dog days” of August, with the temperatures hovering so high, I’m relieved for my electric bill whenever I spend significant chunks of time away from home. And our gospel readings are starting to feel like “dog days” – maybe the “bread days” – of John’s gospel. More of the same each week, about the bread from heaven, the bread of life, and what does it all mean?

This week we get some help from the other readings, starting with a text from the book of Proverbs about Wisdom. We don’t get many readings from this book in our weekly lectionary, only six over the three-year cycle of readings, so we can enjoy this one.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs was written as a set of instructions for ethical living, coming from a father, meant for his sons. The intended audience was all male, which was just a fact of life at that ancient time.

Wisdom is presented as a female being, so it is Woman Wisdom who invites guests to *her* house and *her* feast. We see that a lot of preparation goes into making this hospitable

banquet. And the wisdom she offers is based in the here and now, with three guidelines: to lay aside naivety, to live an ethical life, and to walk straight in understanding – to live a life that embraces wisdom.

Then we read some more from Psalm 34, which sounds like Wisdom could have been the narrator speaking to us: the lions may go hungry, but we eat the food of God.

Food is important in church life, isn't it? From coffee hour to potlucks, dinner church, and Easter breakfasts. When we gather to share meals as we did at the picnic on August 1st we're part of a long tradition. Some scholars even suggest that eating and drinking together is the most important act of Christian community found in the New Testament. That sharing food and table is blessed by the God who came to us in flesh and blood to share our life.

We hear more about Christian fellowship in the reading addressed to the church in Ephesus. When they – we – are filled with Christ's Spirit, we respond in praise to God and we live our lives wisely.

It all sounds great, until we hear today's challenging gospel. We may feel stuck right in the middle of this argument between Jesus and the crowd that's been following him, about bread from heaven and then Jesus' talk of eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Maybe we even wonder what this talk about flesh and blood, heavenly bread, even the Lord's Supper, has to do with us. What does it have to do with the ups and downs of everyday life, with the things that really matter: our hopes and fears, loves and hates, our living and dying? What does it have to do with us 2,000 years later during our challenging times?

Some of us may come to the Scripture readings we hear each Sunday for comfort and counsel, for meaning. Not necessarily the whole meaning of life, but the meaning that makes life worth living. So, like the crowd in today's gospel, we may get frustrated with Jesus' abstract words about eating and drinking his body and blood, when we're looking for something more concrete. The crowd asks, "How can this man give us his flesh?" As in, "We need something a little better than abstract, metaphorical promises!"

But Jesus answers back, "I am telling you the truth," to the crowd in Capernaum and to us gathered here this morning. He says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...For my flesh is the real food; my blood is the real drink."

And we realize that Jesus is serious. He's not speaking in the abstract – it's not a symbol, he really means it. That Jesus would actually give us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink.

This must have shocked the people in Capernaum – it would be an abomination under Jewish law and the prophets. And we may shrink back from it too, because it might sound closer to cannibalism than Christianity. When was the last time we really paid attention to the words of Jesus we remember every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper?

One pastor, Martin Copenhaver, describes what happened in his church when one of the parishioners did pay attention. He was repeating Jesus’ familiar words, “This is my body, given for you; this is my blood, shed for you” and suddenly a small girl said loudly, “Ew, yuck!”

For three weeks now we’ve been reading from the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel, connecting it with our faith and especially with the sacraments, and how they nourish our faith. Now today, in the fourth week, we get to the heart of it. We begin to see what’s at stake for Jesus, just how much we’re worth to him. Today, Jesus offers to us his own flesh and blood that will be placed upon the cross, *for our sake*.

After three weeks of trying to understand what Jesus means by the bread of life and the food from heaven, today he makes himself very plain. Jesus uses gritty language to confront us with the claim and promise of God, who becomes incarnate, taking on flesh, becoming just like us so that one day we may be like God.

In Jesus the Word made flesh, and in the sacraments, the Word given physical, visible form, we meet God who will not be satisfied with anything less than our whole selves. In Hebrew the expression “flesh and blood” is an idiom that means the whole person – heart, mind, spirit, feelings, hopes, fears, everything. In Jesus Christ the whole of God meets us to love and redeem the whole of who we are, good, bad, and ugly.

This kind of sums up Saint John’s testimony, as Jesus has been described as the shepherd and we are the sheep; that he is the vine and we are the branches; he abides in God and we abide in him. As Pastor Copenhaver says, in today’s gospel “language is pressed to the limits to express the indissoluble union and participation of one life in another. For those who receive Jesus, his life clings to their bones and courses through their veins. He can no more be taken from the believer’s life than last Tuesday’s breakfast can be plucked from one’s body.”

We hear the words of the promise again and again without understanding, without hearing. Perhaps because the words are difficult to hear and it’s difficult for us to grasp their true meaning. Maybe we all need to have an emotional response, to be shaken up like the little girl was in Pastor Copenhaver’s congregation.

God promises us in the sacraments of communion and baptism to be one with us, and for us, forever. To stick with us and even in us, no matter what.

Each time we open these little cups in the pews or at home, or come to the rail together, in these physical elements we have God's concrete promise that God cares about our births and deaths, our marriages, jobs, our successes and our failures. God has joined God's own self to them, and to us, through Christ the Word made flesh, given for us.

In the meal this morning we become Christ's body in the world. So let us come eat and drink the promise, meet the God who meets us exactly where we are right now. Come receive the real food and drink that sustains us in this world: meet the God who offers us life in Jesus Christ, now and forever.

To him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever.

Amen.