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A sermon preached on John 6:51-69 by Emily Hull McGee
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I.

Among my favorite of Episcopal pastor and author Barbara Brown Taylor's many stories of life in the church is the one with the Eucharistic exclamation. She was serving communion one Sunday, and a young girl approached the table for her first experience of this ritual of Christian worship. Her face was alive with expectation for what she might find there.

Taylor says "her chubby fingers circled the chalice as she peered into her reflection. 'The blood of Christ,' I said, guiding it to her lips, 'the cup of salvation.' 'Eww, yuck!' She said, pushing the cup back at me. 'You keep it. I don't want any.'"¹

Truth from the mouths of babes, right?

II,

That little girl likely voiced that day what countless others throughout the spread of human history have thought too. 'The body and blood of Christ,' we say? 'Eat my flesh and drink my blood,' Jesus says in the Gospel of John? It's no wonder that some of the earliest antagonizers of the Christians accused them of being a cannibalistic bunch! That kind of language seems better suited in TV scenes from *The Vampire Diaries* or *American Horror Story*, not the lips of Jesus! Why on earth would anyone willingly partake in such a gory-sounding supper, much less rearrange their life around it?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p73.

That question isn't just ours, but one that seemed to be on the minds of those who heard Jesus make such a command. For throughout the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, we've sat with the thousands who were hungry and fed on the lawn. We've followed the curious as they crossed water to track him down. We now wonder with the Jewish leaders in opposition to Jesus, those who grumbled about his claims to give flesh and blood – doesn't he know he's breaking Levitical commandment that prohibits the eating of any creature's blood?² We awaken with the disciples, their awareness growing with every repetition of Jesus's stark language that the life of discipleship is neither easy nor uncomplicated. And as this chapter draws to a close, we are implicated along with Jesus's reference to Judas, his first flesh-and-blood betrayer. Like the little girl and the icky chalice, the crowds and the disciples, even you and me, it seems Jesus perplexes a countless many with these curious words.

II.

A sweet Italian grandmother once was adjusting to her surroundings in her new American home. As so many do, she'd immigrated from her native land to the land of the free with high hopes for her children's prosperity and happiness here. And yet, she found Americans' pursuit of such prosperity and happiness to be puzzling, starting right in Aisle 4 in the local supermarket. Eyeing suspiciously the rows and rows of packaged bread, she'd ask, "why do people eat-a these things? They have-a no taste!" For to her, life was just too short to eat anything but good bread and to drink anything but good wine. As her granddaughter later said, "little wonder we spent nearly every Saturday

² Leviticus 17:10-14

of my childhood making our own bread, pizza, and pasta for our family. Why settle for bread that is not bread, for life that is not life?”³

When we hear Jesus’s claim that **this** kind of bread is bread given ‘for the life of the world,’ we know it isn’t just any old loaf of Wonder Bread. Jesus says that this bread isn’t even that wondrous manna in the wilderness your ancestors spoke of! For unlike any other, this bread will never die — rather, through it, the world will find life.

The bread of life, given for the life of the world — kind of makes you wonder not just about the bread, but about this life Jesus speaks of: what this type of life might look like, what sort of shape it takes, what contours for living might it demand. In the words of theologian Alexander Schmemmann, “of what life do we speak, what life do we preach, proclaim, and announce, when, as Christians, we confess that Christ died for the life of the world? What *life* is both motivation, and the beginning, and the goal of Christian mission? ... *What is the life of life itself?*”⁴

On the one hand, John tells us that Jesus says, “I came that you might have life and have it in abundance.” And yet today’s passage speaks less broadly and more specifically, less metaphorically and more literally, less ‘dreamy life on Instagram’ and more ‘real life with laundry to do, bills to pay, mouths to feed, health to recover.’ It seems to me that today’s passage offers us three characteristics of this ‘life of life itself’ for our consideration.

First, this life of which Jesus speaks is **entirely incarnational**. Four times in this handful of verses does Jesus speak of his flesh and blood, his

³ Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, “John 6:56–69,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p385.

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, p12-13.

earthy, vivid word choice making clear he's not speaking in hazy metaphor here. But if we've been reading this gospel, we shouldn't be surprised though, right? For this is the Word made flesh, the One who pitched his tent and moved into our creaturely neighborhood, the One in whom we can abide! One scholar says, "incarnation is so against our natural, normal, widespread expectations for what is spiritual and religious that we must have Jesus reiterate to us that 'flesh' is where God deems to meet us. It is as if, throughout this sixth chapter, Jesus has been gradually, patiently raising the bar on incarnation."⁵

For this life with Jesus is not lived as an extended intellectual exercise. We don't think our way into belief alone, surrounded by ideas and teachings however compelling they may be. No, this life is literally imbued with flesh and blood, and it is his life we remember and his death we proclaim every time we gather around the table with these his gifts. For as one preacher says, "For those who receive Jesus, the whole 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."⁶

Secondly, this life of which Jesus describes is **thoroughly intentional**. As I read and reread our text this week, my mind traveled to the growing number of consumers who have begun to prioritize the eating habits of animals. Grass-fed (instead of grain-fed) cows to provide beef, yogurt, milk, and cheese are soaring in popularity, and the demand far exceeds the

⁵ Will Willimon, "John 6:51-58," *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p359.

⁶ Martin Copenhaver, http://day1.org/4043-eating_jesus

supply.⁷ Leading one of the fastest-growing sectors in the marketplace, the Non-GMO Project now marks over 43,000 food products whose makeup do not include any genetically-modified ingredients.⁸ It seems that for those who have the access to and convictions about the food they eat, there's a heightening desire for food to be produced in ways that are sustainable and careful for both the environment and the welfare for all parts of the food chain. And for some, it's not just about the food *they* eat... it's about the food eaten by the *animals*, which *then* becomes the food they eat.

I couldn't help but to wonder — what if we Christians were as thoroughly intentional about what we're consuming as we sup on Jesus, as some shoppers are about the diet of their cows or chickens? *For when we eat of his flesh and drink of his blood, we're not just consuming to be fed, we're being nourished to live.*

When we feast on Jesus, we must then feast with the ones he did — oppressed and oppressors, prostitutes and pious, the indifferent and the ones longing to be set free. When we make a meal of our Lord, we make a meal as he did — nourished by prayer and solitude, giving himself to those in need, wholly relying on God for daily sustenance. When we consume Christ, we consume as he did — his daily diet steady with the greatest commandment to feed and be fed through loving God and loving neighbor. By paying attention to Jesus's way of living, we intentionally begin to live ourselves as Jesus did. As his lifeblood courses through and guides our own, he is transforming us from the inside out.

⁷ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/03/22/520015345/why-more-farmers-are-making-the-switch-to-grass-fed-meat-and-dairy>

⁸ <https://www.nongmoproject.org/gmo-facts/what-is-gmo/>

Finally, this life of which Jesus modeled can be **sometimes intimidating**. We hear in today's passage that many of the disciples when hearing such a message said, "this teaching is difficult. What can accept it?" only to later turn back and no longer follow along with him. Ever since, there have been those who follow only to turn away when the demands of the Christian life become too challenging to enact every moment, too disruptive of the life we had planned, too conflictual with worldly priorities and prejudices. It's hard enough to simply be with Jesus, much less try and follow Jesus. But to *consume* him? Sometimes I think I'll just have a salad, thank you very much!

This life of the world that we are audaciously promised by God in Christ is entirely incarnational, thoroughly intentional, and honestly, sometimes intimidating. So we ask: *what, then, must we do to have that kind of a life?* Is there even a first step that even those of us who are cynical or doubtful or scared or comfortable or detached or angry could make?

IV.

Author Nora Gallagher tells a story of her friend Kay, who moved from Colorado to Los Angeles some years ago. Like any transplant to a new city, it seemed to take Kay awhile to find her footing. Sensing her need, Kay's friend Lucy invited Kay with her to church. Kay went along rather reluctantly, taking up residence in the back row for months on end and peppering Lucy with questions about all she was experiencing. Each week when it came time for communion, all the other worshipers around her stood and made their way to the table. Kay, on the other hand, crossed her arms tightly and stayed put.

Week after week, this pattern continued until one Sunday, the rector approached Kay after worship. Hands on his hips, he peered over his wiry glasses at Kay and tried not to sound as if he were scolding her but rather inquiring gently: 'why don't you come to communion.' His tone seemed to imply she was missing something. Kay could only muster up a lamely mumbled, 'I don't know' when he asked, to which he replied, 'This is our family, and this is our table. You should come.'

It had never occurred to Kay that she was the only one who didn't partake. She warmed to his analogy about the family, but just couldn't bring herself to stand and come.

As any good friend would do, Lucy finally asked Kay: "what are you afraid of?" 'What **was** she afraid of?', Kay wondered. The next Sunday, Kay finally stepped out in faith, knelt at the altar, and watched as the priest began to approach her closer and closer with the bowl of bread.

Kay recalled the moment, saying, 'It was at this point that I realized I would have to open my hands. When the moment came, I came as close as I ever have to hearing the voice of God. I heard an almost audible, *Come on, girlfriend. Open your hands.*

About Kay's story, Nora Gallagher says this: "it's dangerous, opening your hands. You don't know what will end up in them. This may have been the smartest thing Jesus ever did. He must have thought, 'how can I make them step into the unknown? How can I get them to let in some surprise? I know, I'll figure out a way for them to put their hands out in front of them, empty.'⁹

⁹ Nora Gallagher, *The Sacred Meal*, p44-45.

Friends, the invitation of Christ to feast upon him is no less than a promise for abundant life and abiding for all eternity. There are no more nourishing meals, no more intimate invitations. Jesus is incarnational and intentional, his flesh and blood utterly reorienting us from the inside out.

But if for you such an invitation feels intimidating and you wonder about that first step, might you but open **your** hands, relinquishing control and certainty to the One whose wounded hands would soon lead even the deepest doubter to proclaim, “my Lord and my God!”¹⁰

I imagine what would be ready to fill them would be nothing less than the bread of life, bread whose wonder is available *for all the life of the world*. And I imagine too that our Precious Lord would grab hold of our open hands and lead us home.

Amen!

¹⁰ John 20:24-29