

Lectionary 20/Proper 15 (B)  
August 16, 2009  
Text: John 6:51-58

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I remember a time when a friend of mine baked a big batch of home-made chocolate-chocolate chip cookies for a church picnic. She brought a huge tray full of cookies that were soft and moist and rich, and amazingly delicious. They were so good, I asked her what she put in them. What was the “special ingredient” that made them rich and tasty? She said, “God.” I laughed, and said, “No, really, what did you put in the cookies?” And she said, “God!” And I never did find out what her secret ingredient was... unless it really was God.

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus says some truly outrageous, even disturbing things. He speaks of himself as the living bread that has come down from heaven. He says that the bread he gives for the life of the world is his flesh. He says that all who eat his flesh and drink his blood have eternal life. He leaves his listeners confused and offended. They wondered what he was talking about. And maybe we wonder the same thing. Living bread? Eating flesh?

There are a number of things that threaten to derail our efforts to understand Jesus. In our society, bread is one of many things we might choose to eat. We might have bread with a meal, like toasted garlic and parmesan bread to go with spaghetti. Or fluffy dinner rolls to go with a roast. Or even for breakfast, we might enjoy buttery, flakey biscuits with scrambled eggs and bacon. Just as often, though, we might choose to let the main course stand by itself, without bread of any kind. But that wasn't the way it was in Jesus' time. For most people, bread was the meal. It was every meal. Maybe there would also be a bit of fish, maybe some dried fruit, but the main thing was bread. So when Jesus uses the image of bread, he means food, nurture, sustenance. The bread he's talking about isn't just something nice to go along with a meal. It is the meal. Bread is what you need to live.

The really difficult and challenging thing Jesus says about this bread that we need to live is this: the bread is his flesh. And we are meant to hear an echo from the very beginning of the gospel of John, when the Bible says that God's powerful, creative Word, the Word that called all of creation into being, that Word became flesh and lived among us. God's powerful, creative self-expression has taken up residence here, in the life of Jesus. God's presence with us in the healing, forgiving, loving life of Jesus—that's the bread we need. It's not just as a nice addition to a life that would be just fine without it. God's presence with us in Jesus is the bread that we can't live without, the bread that gives us the life that really is life; the only sort of life truly worth living.

A friend of mine mentioned recently hearing something interesting about the work of the Wycliffe Bible Translators in New Guinea. When it came to translating “bread” in John 6, they were stumped. The indigenous people of New

Guinea wouldn't eat bread more than once a week when they took their goods to market. What was the food the people ate every day? Sweet potatoes! The translators thought about rendering the passage to have Jesus say, "I am the Sweet Potato of Life!" They ended up using, "I am the food of life," instead, but what an interesting challenge to express the daily, essential, life-giving presence of Christ for us. How might you put into words how Christ feeds your spirit and gives you strength, day in and day out? I am the sandwich of life? The salad of life? The coffee of life?

But there's more. As if it's not enough for us to receive this rich and beautiful insight, Jesus wants to open our hearts and minds, to give us an even deeper understanding into this relationship of life and love that he wants to share with us. So Jesus pushes on this image of being living bread, that this bread is his flesh.

Jesus says, when you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have eternal life. He's speaking now, not only about being the sustaining, upholding, day-to-day presence in our lives, but also about the meal of Holy Communion, the meal we share as a tangible sign that Jesus does indeed give himself to be the bread of our life. And look what Jesus says—everyone who eats his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life—not "will have" eternal life, but "has," here and now, life with God, forgiven, reconciled, at peace as God's beloved child, a life that begins now and is brought to fulfillment in the life to come. As we receive today the bread of life, we are connected with our Lord now and forever.

At Jesus' table we celebrate a simple feast of bread and wine as he commands. "Do this in remembrance of me." The bread we share—it was made with flour, salt and sugar; a little honey and a little milk. It's ordinary bread. There isn't any "special ingredient" that makes it "holy" or "spiritual." It's ordinary bread, but when we come to Jesus' table, he promises that this bread will be his body for us, the body with which he is alive and present among us, the Word made flesh, able to feed our deepest hunger, to fill us with the love of God. Ordinary wine is his blood, given for us, given so that we might know that Christ is with us, alive and full of God's power for healing and hope and forgiveness and new life.

It's the most amazing mystery. Jesus wants to abide with us, to live with us and in us. Jesus isn't content to be merely an object of our contemplation, or even belief. Jesus wants to fill our hearts and lives, to be present in our bodies, so that we can truly embody his loving presence for the world. How can we receive such a gift? With joy and gratitude and awe. With open hearts and open hands. Come to Jesus' table and experience the gift that God has for you here. God desires to abide with you, to live with you and in you forever, and to make your life part of Christ's unending life. Thanks be to God. Amen