

“DINE IN OR TAKE OUT?”

Proverbs 9:1-6; John 6:51-58

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The Rev. Ryan Lambert

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As I begin I would like to ask each of you to close your eyes for a moment and, as you do, picture yourself eating a meal. Be aware of who might be eating with you and where you might be. Imagine the scents that fill the air at this meal; imagine the sounds of the kitchen, of food being passed, of dinner conversation, all completing your picture of the meal. And now, open your eyes. Where were you transported to, as you thought about eating? Perhaps the meal that filled your mind was a great family meal, with people gathered in a traditional place. Perhaps summer thoughts brought to mind a picnic or an outdoor barbecue, or maybe the meal you thought of took place in a favorite restaurant. Maybe there were many people laughing as you ate, or maybe you thought of an intimate meal for two. No matter where your dreamscape meal occurred, I would suspect that the simple questions I asked of you led you to easily fill in quite a complete picture. Food and drink have a dramatic pull in our culture because so much happens when we eat. Eating is a community event; table gatherings are where conversations happen and where families and friends connect. This isn't something new, and obviously food has always been an important cultural element, even in the time of Jesus. Thus, finding the gospel of John portraying Jesus using the language of food to describe the needs of community is really no surprise. From our dreams of meals past and future we find ourselves connected to the words of Jesus and right in the middle of the gospel.

Now I would suspect your recollections of food and drink were tempered a little bit by our reading from scripture. Jesus' words in the gospel of John are hard for us to hear because they are so graphic in nature. My own initial reaction to the text leaves me wondering how we, as Christians, can overcome a text that seems to call us into a strangely cannibalistic sect. Yes, I said cannibalistic! Hear it again, *“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.”* My own visions of a family gathered for a traditional Thanksgiving meal or a couple sharing a romantic candlelight dinner for two are shattered when I read this text. How exactly are we supposed to understand this text and know that by professing our belief in Christ that we aren't being inducted into some cult-like group? This text makes it easy to understand why the early Christians found themselves accused of cannibalism; and yet everything we believe about Jesus is wrapped up in this text, and so we cannot simply ignore it. When hearing this passage the body and blood of Christ as offered to you and to me leaves me a bit uncomfortable; which is a reality that shocks this person who has sometimes said, *“If I haven't had communion I haven't worshipped.”*

In order to understand this text we need to go back and think about the Gospel of John and the Johannine community. It is from the followers of John from which the biblical book of Revelation comes, and thus surprising and difficult imagery isn't out of the norm. These folks were themselves outsiders in their community; living what might be described as *“an alternative lifestyle,”* which many Romans and

Jews saw as dangerous to the governmental structure and the religious traditions of the day. Followers of Jesus were fermenting a new understanding of how one must live, and this new social pattern was disruptive to the social order of the day. Some theologians, most notably Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, look at the language used by the Johannine community and describe it as an “anti-language”; and they also describe the Christian community of John's Gospel as an "anti-society", that is, a consciously alternative society consisting of exiles, rebels, or ostracized deviants. It thus developed this "anti-language", a resistance language used to maintain its highly sectarian religious reality. From this outsider status, some of the strange expressions found in the gospel make greater sense. “Anti-language” is itself a strange concept, but I think it is analogous to the language that was used by slaves which allowed them to communicate to each other, all the while leaving their masters unaware of the hidden messages in their words and songs.

Episcopal theologian Sarah Dylan Breuer describes the Johannine community out of which this text comes as being “a community keenly feeling fear, isolation, and betrayal in light of the persecution they are experiencing.” She also notes that “John's gospel is one with a lot of bitter words for ‘the world’ from which the community feels so alienated and threatened, but they are painfully, consistently clear in affirming nonetheless that ‘the world’ that hates them is still ‘the world’ which God so loves that he sent his only begotten son (John 3:16).” The community in which the Gospel of John was birthed saw themselves as being “in the world,” but clearly not “of the world.” And, thus, I think they created their own language: an anti-language, in order to distinguish who was in and who was outside their community. For this community the flesh and blood of Jesus then become a rallying point, symbols of the great sacrifice of the God, and symbols for this community of outsiders that tell of God's unbelievable welcome to and for them. “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died.” The Johannine community needed a way of distinguishing how and why their following of Jesus was different from the historic Jewish faith of the time; and as a persecuted community the language of John's gospel provides us with an example of how they described the difference. The body and blood of Christ are yours to share, or, they aren't. I suspect that the community of John would have said, “If the sacrifice of Jesus and the body and blood are too much for you, then you aren't cut out for this community.” For the Johannine community, for that community of outsiders, the sacrifice of Jesus was a constant promise that their struggles were worth something. Our 21st Century sensibilities, mine included, are violated by this text; but for those who lived in fear of reprisal because of their faith, this text makes it clear that for the community of followers that surrounded John, belief in Jesus was the only food that would sustain them.

In wrestling with the meaning of this text, I have found new respect for the sacrificial language that is always at the heart of Eucharistic theology. Together, we live in a time when Christianity is engrained in the ideals of dominant culture; and so, although I struggle to identify with the outsider mentality of the Johannine community, I think the fullness of their identity as followers of Jesus is inspiring and is a model to which we should aspire. This is especially true in an age when the name of Christianity is so often high-jacked in order to build political alliances while ignoring the social re-ordering that I believe the gospel requires.

In this community we partake of communion once a month, and this text makes me wonder, more than

three years removed from the forced theological reflection of my ordination paper, about what the bread and cup mean to me and to us as a community. At camp a couple of weeks ago we were preparing for communion and one pastor, in an off-hand manner not meant to convey disrespect, described “intinction” - the communion process that involves taking a piece of bread and dipping into the cup - as “rip and dip.” I remember laughing at the description, and smiling knowingly as I imagined the parade of middle school youth who would soon partake in the glorious feast on the shores of Lake Couer d’Alene. But in light of our text this week, I do wonder what we really think of communion. For the Johannine community the body and blood of Christ were literally the life-blood of the community; there was no gospel without remembering the sacrifice of Jesus and without accepting that that fate might also be theirs to share. Without that immediacy, and without the fear and outsider status, is it possible that sharing the bread and cup has become nothing more than a benign ritual? It is always nice when we have communion, with our liturgies and our smiles as we meet each other in the aisle on the way to share the wonderful bread and the juice. But our text for today reminds us that the feasts we share are truly meant to be something more than just ritual.

In the language of our time, I think that as we share the bread and cup we are confronted with a choice that is rooted in the anti-language of the Johannine community. For us, the choice is whether we dine-in or take-out. The communion feast is a beautiful and powerful ritual that is practiced in congregations across the world, but I submit that too often we break off a piece of bread and dip it into the cup and return faithfully to our seats without really ingesting the gospel. This, my friends, is dining-in - and it is a choice we make. Sometimes it is a choice we make purposely, and other times it is all we have the energy for. However, if the communion feast is only for us, I think we are missing out on something that the Johannine community understood and testified to in the language of their day.

Communion, at its best, is meant to be about a coming together. One of the dictionary definitions of communion is “the act or an instance of sharing, as of thoughts or feelings” and this is, I think, at the heart of how John’s gospel speaks of the sharing in the body and blood of Christ. Communion is meant to be a connective meal that invites us into a place of sharing. That, I believe, cannot be accomplished unless we recognize that, at its best, the communion feast is a take-out meal. It is a take-out meal because when we partake in the bread and cup we are called to share the energy, the enthusiasm, the passion, and the gospel that we experience in that moment with the whole world. For the Johannine community there was no separation between their lives as followers of Jesus and the rest of the lives; and that is what we are called toward as we partake in our monthly feasts. For the community surrounding John, justice and peace were found in the body and blood; so, too, were community and love. Obviously, this passage is not simply about eating, but too often we forget that it is truly about life. And we are called then from our experience at Christ’s table, from the hopes and dreams for our lives, and from our dreams of the world, to meet Christ’s people and to share the gospel. The feast is where we must find sustenance, and it is the place from which we become the evangelist - not simply in word, but indeed, as with John’s community, in everything we do - to bring Christ’s peace and the promise of God’s justice into the world.

And just in case you are having one of those, “I can’t be an evangelist” moments, know that I’m well acquainted with them, too. But our reading from Proverbs, in the voice of Wisdom, reminds us that we

are all called: “You that are simple, turn in here!” To those without sense she says, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.” We are all “simple”; we all are sometimes without sense; and we are all called by God. Christ’s table calls us to a feast, and from there we are sent out into the world. There isn’t much on the take-out menu, but it is all we need. It is all the world needs. Thanks be to God! Amen.

References:

Malina, Bruce and Rohrbaugh, Richard, Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998.

Sarah Dylan Breuer writes at <http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary>. This quote comes from her post entitled “Proper 15, Year B.”