

To Become What We Eat

As I've reflected on our Gospel passage – which can be quite challenging, it finally came to me that the bottom line – as Jesus in his human embodiment clearly understood – is: **If we human disciples are going to experience God, it has to be in and through our bodies – because that's where we are, where we exist, where we live. Jesus, having become human, with of course a human body... also experienced this!**

This part of John's Gospel is as embodied as it gets, **even to the point of Jesus offending and confusing many - apparently** right from the time he first said these words. As our Gospel today notes this included the Temple authorities, ... what with hints of cannibalism & all. At this point, not only these Authorities, but numbers of Jesus' disciples not only question Jesus' meaning, but the soundness of his mission... and perhaps his mind as well.

For Jesus, our eating his flesh and drinking his blood makes us *one / comingled with him, and thereby with God*, in the deepest – most intimate and complete – way, beyond any “comingling” possible w/in our normal human repertoire. This is VISCERAL, ORGANIC, UNMEDIATED connecting... comingling means “to blend completely into a harmonious whole.” “to blend completely into a harmonious whole.” It's essentially what happens when we eat healthy food.

As many would know this Gospel falls within the I AM statements central to John's Gospel. There are seven of these I AM statements in John:

- I am the bread of life (6:35, 41, 48, 51)
- I am the light of the world (8:12; 9:5)
- I am the gate of the sheepfold (10:7, 9)
- I am the good shepherd (10:11, 14)
- I am the resurrection and the life (11:25)
- I am the way, the truth, and the life (14:6)
- I am the true vine (15:1, 5)

Each of these proclamations invites us to explore and better understand how – *through Jesus* – we are **connected to** the Divine... to the source of Life. Today's “I Am the Bread of Life” statement is the only one repeated **four times** and it draws our attention to the essence of who Jesus is (BREAD), how that benefits us (LIFE-GIVING & SUSTAINING), and how we access that benefit (through FAITH & PARTICIPATING IN THE BODY... in THE LIFE OF CHRIST).

John leads us to these insights in a number of ways:

- (1) **First**, the context of these teachings: It is earlier in this chapter that Jesus takes 5 loaves of bread and multiplies them so that 5000 people are fed. But, as we know, that's not all! The abundance is so great, that even after all are fed, his disciples gather up 12 baskets of leftovers! Over-the-top abundance is a theme of John where Jesus is said to have come that *we might have life, and have it abundantly.*
- (2) **Next**, John has Jesus referring to the Exodus and Passover. The Feast of Passover / of *unleavened bread* is an important reference point for Jesus' audience both originally and now. Passover celebrates Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, it is a story of *freedom*, of liberation, and connects with the bread miracle of manna from heaven to sustain them each day in the desert. The people then – as we do today – literally need bread to live another day. In John's Gospel, Jesus gives the people bread and then uses that connection to reveal something about himself: *he is the one who can nourish them*, ... he is bread - not like the manna in the desert lasting only day to day – but for eternity... for the life of the world!

(3) And, I can't leave it unsaid. that in the ancient world – with roots in biological experience and with stereotypes continuing to today – feeding was, as it largely remains, a female role, **so Jesus's images depict God in clearly feminine terms.** In the New Testament context, *feeding and instilling virtue were closely tied together* and **both were responsibilities of women.** Jesus typically relates feeding people with spiritual formation, saying for example that his food is “**doing the will of God.**” When he does this, he assumes a female role of providing nourishment for **both** body and soul! Think of the proverbial grandma – like my Babi: she makes you comfort food (I think of plum dumplings!) and she also teaches you how to behave. So does Jesus. Perhaps this is a useful insight for our Institutional Church's discernment regarding the role and ordination of women...

Clearly, **Jesus as Bread** has many layers of meaning in John. Especially it occurs to me, as our Bishops are promoting “Eucharistic Revival” in our Church.

SO WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ALL THIS? I think there are three pretty basic and actually somewhat familiar lessons:

❖ **First** is the message of “Eating to LIVE, not living to Eat”

The best nutritionists tell us that one should eat to live, not live to eat. [As some of you know, at this moment in my life, I could go on & on about this – but I won't!] The central point of our passage is **LIFE**. Jesus causes us to truly LIVE —abundantly, presently, and eternally. This Gospel is interested in nothing but us living to the max!

I wonder if sometimes we expect too little ... Jesus says LIFE for ALL and not just-enough life, but ABUNDANT life. 5000 fed, with leftovers! And, again, I can't pass by the example of one of our foremothers: Mary of Bethany, who shows us how it's done: in her anointing of Jesus' feet – she used not just some precious oil, not just-enough precious oil – but so much – we're told – that the fragrance fills the room, as she ignores the critical, joy-robbing, miserly Judas all the while, because... as she knew in Jesus's company: there's *life* (pulse, heartbeat, brainwaves) **and then**, there's *LIFE* (awareness, joy, community)! There's *living* (punching the clock, going through the motions) **and there's LIVING** (loving, learning, growing, relating, creating, en-joying!!)

❖ **Second** is the message of “Living Faith-fully”

How does a person get a hold of this abundant LIFE? It is a **Gift** ... THE gift of faith: Free of charge. All-inclusive. No degrees, no suit and tie required! Starting now with no expiration date! Simply: “*Do THIS in remembrance of me: break bread together ...and share ...and care for one another...*” Sounds like “Good News” to me!

❖ **Third** and so important, I think, is the message that “You are what you eat”

This Gospel takes flesh and blood and the body very seriously, both Jesus's and ours. Creation of the world includes bodies. The Word became *flesh*. Bodies are the site of holiness, of revelation, of intimate love. In fact, “greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends” (15:13). And that's exactly what Jesus does. We must be very careful not to make the mistake of pitting flesh and spirit in opposition and associating the flesh with evil or denigrating the created order in *any* way, since God is the Creator. [Thank you, Fr. Andy!]

We – again as did Jesus – **experience God** in our *flesh* – as daughters and sons... progeny... *off-spring*... shared DNA if you will. Our flesh is energized by the Spirit – we are in-spirited! Jesus, God, and the Spirit *dwell in us* – we participate/commingle/harmonize with them in our *actual bodies* – and Jesus, God and the Spirit *dwell among us* – in our *actual relationships with one another and in relationship with all our sisters and brothers.* The mystics know this fully [Like Thomas Merton in Louisville at the corner of 4th & Walnut Streets]; the rest of us, hopefully, experience this from time to time – often enough, to get a “taste” of that experience, to bring us back to being fully present to **that reality ... to that real “presence.”**

For our Catholic Christian Community, the eucharistic celebration is such a place for us: The Eucharist (or Communion, or the Lord's Supper, or Mass) **reminds us we are part of Christ's Body, reconnects us to that Body, ... a community of LIFE.** *We can't do Eucharist alone!* Recall the bread is to be ... "blessed, broken & *shared.*" Human beings were *not made* to be alone. In fact, we cannot be human alone and certainly cannot attain or maintain abundant life without others.

In our Sabbath Eucharistic Gatherings: we feast on the word, chew on it and swallow it, internalizing it so that it becomes part of us. And, we, "feed off of" one another's presence and gifts – and so nourish one another. We stand in faith and offer our bodies and lives to God with the bread and wine. And God transforms the bread and wine into the presence of the Risen Jesus and transforms US into the Body and Blood of Christ: the church in the world, as food and justice, hope and peace for all. We eat the Bread and the Word and we taste everlasting life in the Body of Christ... in the Communion of Saints. *"The cup that we bless — is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread we break — is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."* We are all interconnected – part of one glorious, life-giving whole!

And once again, in few minutes knowing that the bread that we are to share *here and now* is a sharing in Christ ... present within us and – in a special way – among us in this gathering AND, grateful that our lives are forever renewed by every sharing of Eucharist, let us – as St. Augustin reminds us: "receive the Body of Christ – to become the Body of Christ:" a **REAL, LIFE-GIVING PRESENCE** in the world!

Amen!