

THE
THIRTEENTH
SUNDAY
AFTER
PENTECOST

The Rev.
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John 6: 56-69
Stephanie E. Parker+

It seems that since the frail mind of humanity first perceived that there was “GOD” we have spent far more time arguing and killing each other over this wonderful mystery than celebrating it as a marvelous and amazing gift.

Religious, political and social controversy is as old as humankind and despite God’s best efforts, we seem honor bound to find new ways to punish and reject one another and create deep divisions. Whether we are locked in black or white or even red and blue thinking we seem to have a knack for creating divisions.

To this end, we hear Jesus’ continued teaching on the bread of life. We continue to hear him, in his own earthly time, embroiled in a controversy with his own community.

The faithful who have followed him to this synagogue in Capernaum want a revolution that will liberate them from Roman oppression and instead Jesus offers them his own broken and bloody body as a sacrifice for all that will grant humankind eternal freedom.

If you will participate with me in my life and sacrifice, Jesus tells them, you will receive freedom far beyond the social and political. The freedom I offer you is yours regardless of how the world will seek to divide and fragment itself.

If you believe in me and follow me, he says, then your desire for retribution, violence and rejection of those not like you will cease. Jesus tells us, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide* in me, and I in them.”

Jesus’ words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood can sound like something out of a modern day horror film. Even though I have heard these words hundreds of times in reference to our Eucharist, I am still sometimes shaken by the sound of them.

But Jesus’ strange words about flesh and blood actually give us the clue to his real meaning. He tells us that when we eat of his flesh and drink of his blood, then we abide in him, and he in us.

So, what does it mean to *abide in him*?

In short, it is how we truly join our lives to his in a way that allows us to see the world differently—to abide in him means to see the world through God’s eyes and know we are forever changed in light of this new vision. This is when we choose life over death and connection over division.

Think of this...have you ever loved anyone so much that when you hugged them in a moment of closeness you just lost track of where they ended and you began; when you just poured yourself out as much as you could to let more of the other in? This is what it feels like to *abide* in someone.

I know I always felt like that the first time I held any of my newborn nieces and nephews. The sweetness of their new life, seemingly fresh off the breath of God, just pierced my heart and I wanted to hold them and protect them from anything that might ever harm them.

This, Jesus tells us, is how we face the challenges of this world. This is how we face our fears and live through our controversies. We abide in him. This is how we turn over to God whatever it is that we fear the most trusting that we are loved.

We pour ourselves out in order that he can more readily fill us. We begin to listen to his life-giving words and we come to believe in the power of his mercy and forgiveness. We grow so close to him that we don’t know where Jesus ends and we begin.

When we step out in belief and surrender to God’s love for all, we find ourselves responding to others out of mercy, compassion and forgiveness----- instead anger, frustration and fear---and we can do this because the best part of *us* has become intertwined with Christ’s love.

This is how we live and grow together in the face of whatever conflict or controversy shakes our world, our church, our community, or our personal lives. When we are faced with the troubles of our own present time we will do well to step away from the fear and panic that is often our first response and look at the bigger picture.

When we take a moment to look back we see that in fact much of what we think is unique to our own time and experience is simply another iteration of the ongoing human experience.

I suppose it is the nature of every current generation to think the times in which we live are the definitive times that mark some great turning point—pointing us to either to heaven or hell.

But in fact, every generation of humanity's unfolding story is filled with amazingly wonderful advances and ideas as well as unspeakable cruelties and desecrations. We've always taken 3 steps forward and 2 steps back.

So much of what we see and worry about as “the worst ever” this or that simply is not new. ****Now does that mean we should just become complacent or cynical or live in denial that the world can be a tumultuous and sometimes frightening place? Absolutely not! As a people who love God and follow Jesus, we have been offered a new vision--- a new way to be in the world.

What we are called to do day in and day out, generation after generation, is to remember that the love of God is greater and stronger and more absolute than the multitude of ways we seek to destroy ourselves and to destroy one another over senseless divisions and fears.

When we abide in Christ, when we eat of his flesh and drink of blood---- when we share his risen life this deeply-- then we can do none other than love the world in spite of the way it falls so very short of God's wish for it. ***We can do no other than put our fears aside and love one another across whatever issue divides us.

When we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us with Christ's love we seem to put away the litanies of the way our lives and times are doomed and the *worst ever* ---and instead---we learn to trust----we learn to trust Jesus' very difficult teaching and accept that God does have the power to heal and redeem the world, our Church and our lives.

In our own time we are called as the new disciples to share in this healing and reconciling love. We are called to love and transform this world that still rejects the notion that God's grace and love is given for *all* of humanity—God came for both the *best* and the *worst* of humankind.

So amid a world tossed by turmoil and a Church marked by fast moving change and a political discourse that is toxic, Jesus asks us today, just as he asked the twelve, “Do you wish to go away?”

His poignant question reminds us that we always have a choice.

We can choose violence and divisiveness or we can choose mercy and grace; one leads to death and the other to eternal life.

This phrase “eternal life” confuses us; we attach it to a form of immortality. But the eternal life to which Jesus invites us is not some kind of spiritual immortality after we die; it is instead to choose a way of life that deprives fear of having the upper hand in our present.

The call he issues for those who wish to remain and follow is a messy and heartbreaking one, but in the end it is also the way to a true and meaningful existence...

“Lord, to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Today we have a chance to stand with the ever imperfect, but *nearly always* devoted Peter, and affirm our belief that Jesus is the holy one of God. Amen.

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