



What You're Made Of

John 6:51-59

Larry DeLong

August 16, 2009

Jesus' words here are so hard to hear that they drove away some of his followers. They haven't grown softer over time, either: this passage of Scripture has been a source of argument since the earliest days of the church and they still make us very uncomfortable.

What makes it hard is that Jesus is trying to talk about the truth and mysteries of God. We don't really have words to express clearly what God is about. We can identify some ways that God acts in and through us, and point to generalities in the world; but how God sees the world, God's reality, is so different from our narrow view that listening to Jesus talk about how God works sometimes is like trying to communicate with someone from an Australian outback tribe: there is almost no common experience or environment between us, and no shared language at all.

So Jesus uses analogies, metaphors, stories — God is like this, the Kingdom of God is like that. The problem with this sort of is that we are humans: imperfect, misunderstanding humans. We hear Jesus' words and jump ahead to make conclusions, turn images into concrete statements, take his metaphors for facts, ignore what seems too hard to understand. It's like trying to experience waves crashing on an ocean beach — the noise, the smell, the feel of the air, the gulls gliding around — from a black and white photograph, and nothing more. We — like the disciples before us -- just do our best, but our clearest insights are often little more than glimpses in a badly distorted mirror.

God and the prophets have used some pretty startling means to try and get their point across: God spoke to Moses out of a burning bush; the prophet Hosea married a prostitute to show how faithful God could be to his wayward people; and Jeremiah, along with a bunch of other things, took an earthenware jug and broke it in front of the elders and priests to show how God would break Jerusalem, then bought a piece of land just before Jerusalem fell to the enemy to show that God would bring his people back. The prophet Ezekiel actually ate a scroll with God's message written on it.

It's a powerful — extreme — way to get a message across. These are prophetic acts: doing something strange to get people to pay attention, and in paying attention, hear what

God is trying to tell them: which is usually either a warning to straighten up and fly right or a reminder that God loves us even in our bullheadedness.

But these powerful messages don't have to be acts; they can be words, too. Words and images pulled out of their usual context, or extreme words that make us stop and wonder what they mean, or words just meant to shock us. Some people try to use profanity to put some punch in their speech. But using words and images in startling ways is even more powerful, and Jesus does this a lot: he loves to shake up his listeners, throw them off balance. Here's a clue to when he's about to do this: whenever he says "Truly, truly" or words to that effect, he's about to say something outrageous.

And that's what Jesus does in this lesson. He uses words like some sort of prophetic act, right dead in the tradition of Hosea and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, exactly the kind of thing the crowd around him knows from their scripture. It's even more powerful and upsetting, though, because they're not reading about it, or hearing a story about it: it's happening right in front of them. It's a lot easier to read about these things than experience them first hand; Jesus is doing it live and in person, not insulated by hundreds of years; it hasn't been made holy and ok by time.

Thousands following Jesus — have been getting anxious about what Jesus is saying about his relationship to God, and although they were miraculously fed from Jesus' own hand the day before, ready to make him King against his will, when Jesus tells them that he is the "living bread", it's too much. The scholars among them are thinking what he's saying is not just shocking, it's rude, it's blasphemy, an insult to God, and they push back.

And Jesus, rather than argue with them or try to explain himself, just turns up the volume. He makes a statement so extreme that it unsettles everyone — even us: "If you don't eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you." The crowds were stunned. So are we.

We use eating imagery all the time to describe things: Something good is sweet, coarse speech is salty. A phrase of jazz music is tasty; a clever plot is delicious. We use it to express understanding, too. We bite on an idea, we take a sales pitch hook, line, and sinker; we digest someone's statements. This isn't just a quirk of English or modern speech: "taste and see that the Lord is good" says the Psalmist, who also prays, "how sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth... fill me with wisdom and knowledge, that I may be satisfied." Ezekiel ate God's word — literally — to embody, or better, in-body, the message there. My oldest daughter ate very well as an infant. Once she started on solid food, she never looked back. But she had favorites, of course: carrots, squash, pumpkin, and what we called, as only a parent in the privacy of their own home can, "nummy sweets," sweet potatoes.

Nothing wrong there, right? Of course not. Healthy stuff, all those yellow vegetables ...but there are side effects. Some of you already know where I'm going: yes, her skin became bright orange-yellow! Like a "tan in a bottle" from the seventies. It really looked a lot better than it sounds, especially in the middle of winter in the North. She looked like a tiny beach volleyball addict.

You are what you eat! She obviously took on some of the characteristics of the food she loved. Some of us do too! But this doesn't just apply to that brownie you'll eat at fellowship this morning, headed straight for the hips: it applies to what we feed our mind and soul as well. What we take into our minds affects us. A steady diet of violence and mayhem will do you no good, we've known that for years; non-stop argument and criticism can make you sour and mean. What we put into our lives, like what we put in our mouths, nourishes us, becomes us. And God always feeds his people. That includes us: we're no different.

In Psalm 88, verse ten, God says, "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." God fed the people he'd called out from Egypt with miraculous food, bread and quail. Jesus fed five thousand people bread and fish till they almost popped...but it was what he was trying to spoon-feed their souls that was important, the whole point. Jesus says, "I am the living bread" — not some Wonder loaf walking around, but the embodiment of God, pouring out spiritual calories to a starving world with words, and love, and his own sacrifice.

And if we take in what he offers us, it changes us, too. It begins to make us different, like my daughter's skin, changing us from inside, like baptism washes us, except this time immersing us from within.

The good news is that this isn't something that just happens once, or that will mess up your carefully controlled diet — it builds over time. And it builds so subtly in most of us that we don't even know what's happening to us, or why. We become subjects of the sovereign God, we become citizens of the Kingdom of God...we move into a new life, becoming, like Jesus, living bread, feeding those around us.

Most of you — very probably all of you — are doing this every day. Do you pray for someone else? Do you participate in the Rotary/Kiwanis/Lions/Elks/Masons/Shriners/Eastern Star causes? Do you visit sick, friends? Do you help with coffee and cookies? Set up worship? Quilt? Usher? Volunteer?

Why do you do these things? Well, because you're a part of whatever it is you're a part of. Precisely. You're a part of the Kingdom of God, and you're doing God's work, here and now.

You have become living bread, a piece of the bread come from heaven to feed us, to change us, to nourish us, to save us.

Name the source of your service, call it by its true name: God.. And like they used to say when someone went out to face a challenge, "show 'em what you're made of — share the source of your life: a steady diet of Christ.