
Engaging The Parts of The Bible You Don't Like

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 15 – Year B

Because you've all been attending church so faithfully and paying such close attention to our readings, you know that this is our fourth week in the same chapter of *John*, *John* 6—and our fourth week talking about bread. And guess what: we have one more to go after this!

I have to admit that I've always struggled with John's Gospel, with this bread-of-life discourse, and especially with the part that we just heard.

John is hard enough, as it is: it is filled with metaphors and symbols and dialogues that resist simple explanations and have been confounding people for two millenia. But this part about eating Jesus's flesh and drinking his blood takes it to a whole different level! The language here is especially strong—better suited to the *Walking Dead* than church on Sunday morning. Sure, the metaphor is present in our practice of Eucharist; but that just makes me even more uncomfortable with the visceral language used here.

When I first saw that this passage was our Gospel for today, I wanted to run the other way! Maybe you did, too.

There are, of course, many ways to get around passages that confuse or bother us. We can do what Martin Luther did: he threw out the whole letter of James, calling it an “an epistle of straw,” because it didn't talk about works the way Paul did. We can be more discrete and just ignore them, sticking with our preferred “canon within the canon.” We can reason away their authority or relevance for us: “Oh, Paul didn't really write that! Jesus didn't really say that! that was a different time and place, with no relevance for us, today!” These things are sometimes true, but they don't absolve us of our responsibility to—and for—these texts.

The good news is that there are blessings to be found when we stop running and wrestle with the passages that we don't like or don't understand. That was my experience, at least this past week, when the lectionary forced to deal with this text that has been such a stumbling block for me.

My aim was to wrangle it into a nice, neat, ten-minute message for you. But it refused to cooperate. Instead, the more time I spent with the dialogue in this chapter, with this metaphor of the bread of life and this language of “flesh and blood,” the more meanings I began to see, and the longer my sermon grew, and the less I could explain.

So, instead of me telling you exactly what it means (as if I knew!), let's do what John probably intended for us to do: let's zoom out a bit and look at the discourse as a whole, and enter into the conversation that is taking place there.

As you'll recall from a few weeks ago, it all started with Jesus feeding a crowd of five thousand people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Impressed, and wanting more of that bread, the people take off after him. But he knows the deeper hunger that is really driving them and speaks to that: “Don't work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

All they seem to hear is the word “work,” and they ask what work they need to do, to get this bread from God?

Jesus responds that the work is God's, and it is belief. So they think that what they need from him, then, is simply proof; and they ask for a sign to help them believe: maybe something like the manna their ancestors ate in the wilderness.

That manna was miraculous, but it was also perishable, Jesus reminds them, and they're after the bread of eternal life. Which brings them back to where they started—bread!

Either something clicks, or they're just tired of going around in circles with Jesus, so they cut to the chase: "Just give us this bread already!"

And Jesus lays the big whammy on them: "*I* am the living bread," he says, "And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Who does this guy think he is? And what's he talking about? The "flesh and blood" of kinship, or sacrifice, or mortality—our physical nature? Or maybe he's referring to that other mystery about the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us?

There are lots of possibilities, but they narrow them to one, and complain to each other, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Their question and growing frustration indicate that they're at least engaged and paying attention, so Jesus presses farther: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." This doesn't exactly clear things up, so they grumble some more. And in next week's reading, conclude that "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it."

And aren't we right there with them? This teaching *is* difficult. Who can accept it? But maybe the task isn't to just accept it, but to engage it. To ask hard questions, and to stay in the conversation, no matter how hard it gets.

That's where growth happens! For me, at least, as I worked on this Gospel from *John*, it worked on me at the same time. It pulled me into this crowd, which reflected my own questions and my own desire for small answers. It stretched me beyond the words of the text and what I understood already, toward Jesus himself. And it brought me back to the simple truth of abiding. Maybe someday I'll be able to explain it. But for now, I think I'll just abide, and participate, and let these holy mysteries do their work on me.

And I wonder if this is perhaps the invitation in difficult passages like this: to participate, to engage, to enter into a living conversation with the Living Bread *and* the Living Word. And to loosen our grip on what we want the Bible to be or say, so that we can begin to appreciate it for what it is: an ongoing conversation and a place where we encounter God and our truest selves.