

The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 16
Year B
August 23, 2015

First Reading: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Psalm 34:15-22

Second Reading: Ephesians 6:10-20

Gospel: John 6:56-69

Preached by The Reverend John A. Satula
St. James Episcopal Church, Amesbury, MA

**In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

Over the last four weeks and concluding today, our Gospel passages have come from the sixth chapter of St. John's Gospel. We have come to that point in our lectionary cycle where we have had this portion of these summer weeks devoted to Jesus' teaching about the Bread of Life. The chapter begins with the miracle accounts of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water and then Jesus engages in a discourse with the crowd that goes on at great length about the Bread of Life, how He is this bread, the bread that has come down from Heaven and that whoever eats of this bread will live forever. And since we began these readings, we may think each week that, "we just heard this", as the verses we ended with the last week are the verses we begin with the next week. I said to a parishioner a few weeks ago—repeating verses, in some cases several verses, can make it hard coming up with new sermon ideas week after week. While it is true we can preach on similar ideas, and glean from these readings similar themes, I feel that, especially with these readings, it is good that we repeat portions of them as this chapter beautifully speaks to our lives today

as it reminds us of some of the incredible benefits we celebrate and receive when we partake of Holy Communion.

During the Advent and Christmas seasons, we often hear the name Emmanuel, which means God with us. This is what happened on Christmas when Jesus took on flesh and blood, God came and dwelt with and among us. After Jesus fed the five thousand we are told that He went with His disciples across the sea and taught at the Synagogue in Capernaum. The crowds followed Him and once they caught up with Him a lengthy discourse ensues between them and Jesus. The discourse revolves around Jesus as the Bread of Life and how through this Bread the people will be granted eternal life. As the discourse continues the crowd becomes more and more agitated and annoyed with Jesus. They want to know what they must do to inherit eternal life, perform the works of God, and they feel Jesus is not only answering their questions in riddles but is saying things to them that are just not true. They complain, "How can He now say, 'I have come down from heaven'? . . . is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? When Jesus says "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh', the crowd responds with "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" And finally Jesus says to them something they find abhorrent, something that He cannot mean, something that they have been taught by the Law and Prophets is an abomination to God. He says "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life. . . Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in

them. . . whoever eats me will live because of me." Is this Man actually serious? Jesus goes on to say that He is speaking the words of spirit and life—that He is speaking the truth—both to the crowd and to us, that to live forever we must eat His Flesh and drink His Blood. The crowd find this teaching very difficult; they ask, "who can accept it?" This is a fascinating question because although it was asked centuries ago it is a question that goes to the very heart of what these teachings mean for us today.

One problem our Gospel readings over the last few weeks presents is what do these readings have to do with anything today? How do these readings about eternal life, eating Jesus' flesh and drinking His blood, help us find or more precisely, help us find as individuals, comfort, confidence, reassurance as we face day to day life. It just seems Jesus is going back and forth with the crowd and what He is saying becomes more and more obscure, what does it even mean when Jesus says "whoever eats of me will live forever?" And in the end we can feel that this discourse happened two thousand years ago and has nothing to do with daily life or our lives today. How does Jesus talking about eternal life, how does any of this conversation He has with the crowd, help us, help us, find comfort, confidence, reassurance with the sickness we may be battling, help us with providing for our family, help us find a new job, help us deal with all the stress in our lives, help us take care of our children, our loved ones, help us deal with being bullied at school or work, how does it help us pass in school, help us just make it through another day, help us deal with all the violence and horrors that occur daily in the world around us? How does it help

us deal with our own unique and personal troubles? Eternal life, Salvation is the great hope and promise of the Christian faith. It is what we believe Christ won for us through His Incarnation, death and Resurrection. It is the sign, the symbol, the promise of the care and love God has for all of us, God's beloved children, it is what awaits us all! Through following Him, eternal life, Salvation is only part of what Jesus is trying to impart to the crowd through this discourse, Jesus is also trying to impart to us Emmanuel—God with us.

When we hear Jesus say the words “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood” we sometimes shrink back a little. Eating someone’s flesh and drinking someone’s blood is not something that squares with our reason or fits with our sensibilities, it is not something we want to think or imagine ever doing. However, in this passage Jesus is being all to literal. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will live forever and abide in me. By offering us His Body and Blood what He is offering us is Himself, for “flesh and blood” is a Hebrew idiom or description representing the whole person. In this passage, what Jesus is offering the crowds, offering the disciples, offering us, is Himself. As Episcopalians, we believe that when we receive Holy Communion, the inward and Spiritual Grace of Communion is that by faith we receive within us the Body and Blood of Christ. Given to us is Jesus Christ. This is the grace, the blessing, the joy we are given through Communion—through Communion we encounter God and are promised that through this life-giving Sacrament we go out into the world filled with the presence and grace of God and therefore can encounter God

in all we do. The very real presence of God is what Jesus offers us today. His very real presence in us and with us in our very real daily lives.

The crowd Jesus spoke to two thousand years ago had many of the same real and present concerns we face today. When we face troubles and stress from another lost night of sleep, failing an exam, having a hard, stressful day which seems endless, to being told by the doctor we have had a reoccurrence of our cancer, we can become completely depleted and ask God why? Why are you putting us through this? These passages from John's Gospel we have been hearing from, Jesus' teaching about the Bread of Life has everything to do with our lives today because it is the powerful affirmation given to us from Jesus that He is with us. At Communion, we encounter Him and are invited to bring Him with us into our lives. No matter what we go through we are assured that Christ goes through it with us. We are told in the Book of Lamentations that God never willingly afflicts anyone and are told today that when we are afflicted God is not putting us through it but is there with us throughout our daily lives. My friends, when we receive Communion we are invited into an encounter with God, God who willingly encounters us wherever we are and who goes with us into this world, strengthening, supporting, encouraging and loving us the whole time.

In today's Gospel reading we are told that after this discourse many of Jesus' followers turned back and did not go about with Him anymore. Jesus turns to His disciples and asks "Do you also wish to go away?" Like the crowd, the disciples also had trouble with Jesus' teaching that we have heard over the last

several weeks, but Simon Peter turns to Him and says "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." We too, can have difficulty with some of Jesus' teachings, understanding exactly what He means at times, living out His ministry in our lives. Through His life, death and Resurrection Jesus gave His whole self to us, Jesus offers us His whole self in us, abiding with us and wants us to offer ourselves, give ourselves to Him so that our lives, so that we, will be filled, filled with the gifts and presence of His ministry and know that what we are promised through Him is life—life today and forevermore. Jesus has offered Himself to us, to be with us through it all, the question becomes what is our answer? What is our answer when we hear those life giving words spoken by Jesus and offered to us anytime we need them, life giving words always offered to us no matter how many times we may have rejected Him in the past, life giving words He offers us today through His Body and Blood. . .the life giving words follow me, come to me, abide in me as I abide in each of you.

And now to God be Glory, Majesty, Honor and Praise forever and forever.

Amen.