

August 25, 2024
The Rev. Mark Pendleton
Christ Church Exeter

God's Extended Family

Jesus said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "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." John 6:56-69

+++

I have always found the word 'family' to be, well, complicated: layered and often emotionally charged. The word can mean many different things to different people. What comes to mind when you hear the word? The family you grew up in – parents and siblings – or perhaps extended cousins and grandparents. The family you may have begun with a spouse or partner. The circle of friends who become your family of choice. A growing trend is to hold a Friendsgiving – a meal with their friends a week before the actual Thanksgiving. Sounds kind of nice, doesn't it? No family drama.

For those who spend a big percentage of their lives at work, colleagues and co-workers can become almost like a family at times.

Some congregations, when the Spirit is moving and when people reach out to one another in concern and for support, can create lifelong relationships and bonds. A church can become like a family to some. But this can be tricky. Like any family, not everyone plays the same roll and feels as understood or see or appreciated. That's the reason why when people ask me how many families Christ Church has on our rolls, I will switch the word to household.

The loaded and layered side of this word 'family' shows up when our experience of family is not the stuff of a Hallmark Christmas movie. Troubled, dysfunctional, oppressive, and abusive sadly also come with the territory. We need only to turn to the pages of the Bible to

see that reality and system failure: Adam and Eve's own offspring and tragic killing of Abel by his brother Cain. Isaac and his half-brother's Ishmael's led very different lives, and the rivalry between twins Jacob and Esau which began as they wrestled even in their mother's womb.

Family. You might remember the story when Jesus' mother and brothers were trying to get his attention when he was speaking the crowds, when someone told him: Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' How did Jesus respond: 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And then pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!

This is what I'm trying to get at: What is it that some parents say to their children and extended cousins why their relationships are so deep and interwoven. "You are my flesh and blood." You are family.

After some four Sundays of reflecting on the Bread of Life, what Jesus says in today's gospel reading next clearly confuses and offends some. He said: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Flesh and blood.

What made "The Way" -- as the early Jesus movement was called -- grow and expand so quickly and widely after the Resurrection is how its message of a new kind of community resonated with all kinds of people. Women, the poor, slaves of the Empire, non-Jewish believers who had no tie to the stories and traditions of Abraham and Moses and David and Isaiah. So many centuries later it can be easy to lose the radical nature of this something new.

Regardless of birthplace or birth order, or any kind of demographic identity that can be used to separate us from one another, this message of an ever-widening family goes to the heart of Christianity. The gospel at its core comes down to simple math: addition not subtraction -- multiplication over division.

This all sounds good. What could possibly go wrong with this new way of looking at life?

The Sunday readings over these past five weeks have a throughline. It started with the feeding of the 5,000. There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. Out of scarcity came abundance. What began with a little, ended up with much. Everyone was fed and no one went without. A foretaste of that 'all you can eat' heavenly banquet.

As we hear today, with Jesus before their eyes, some found his teaching difficult. Even his own disciples started complaining. A nascent mutiny was underway. "Does this offend you" is how Jesus countered.

And perhaps in the most overlooked verse in all of the gospels: "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." It was Peter who steadied the

ship and keep the core of followers together: “To whom can we go?” There was no better option, no other way to feed the deep hunger of those gathered.

Just imagine being in the presence of Jesus himself and then walking away saying “no thanks. I’m out!”

A couple of weeks ago I talked about what makes God angry and then I asked: what makes you most angry? Does it align with what Scripture tells us about God’s anger for injustice, cruelty and human violence and suffering.

Today we could expand with: what could be so confusing, difficult or offensive about the Gospel that one might decide to reject, turn off or walk away?

There will always be those who make a distinction between God and Christ and the church. God never disappoints or betrays but we know that a church made up of human beings can do both. The creed we say each week was written by a committee. Imagine that. And we know that those of who profess to be Christian do not always act like the best ambassadors of our faith. That is all true.

“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink her blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

What would make someone walk away?

Fear. Disbelief. Lack of trust. How could this all be true? What do you mean there’s enough for all? How can I really gain by losing? How can I truly be forgiven? How can I live by dying? How does weakness make me strong? What can the poor know that the rich and powerful will ever know? How are my enemies worth my time let alone any love?

In the years after high school, my hometown was Jacksonville, Florida and nearby was the city of St. Augustine. I came to know it well. Known as America’s first city, it was settled by the Spanish in the 1500’s. It is known today more for its beaches and typical Florida tourist attractions. There is also a park that pays homage to the legend of the Fountain of Youth. The story goes that the explorer Ponce de Leon came to the area searching for the mystical stream that if one would drink from it or bathe in its waters that one’s youth would be restored, and they would never die.

When Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day,” he certainly is not saying that his followers would never grow old and die. What he is inviting us to do it to put out our hands, take what has been given, blessed and broken, and begin to feed our hungry souls. To open our hearts and minds.

There is an abundance of irony when people search for so many ways to stay young to fend off aging and dying, all the while failing to see and appreciate the fullness of life that we are called to now.

We are people of Resurrection: Easter people. That is our identity.

Remember that Christians believe in resurrection and not reincarnation. We do not believe that we will return to this earth and live another life. We believe in something more. We believe that as Christ lived, died and raised, so too will we. We believe in the communion of saints: those who have gone before us at still part of our lives.

A saint once said that when he held up the bread and the cup before those gathered around the altar, he would say: behold who are you: may we become what we receive.

Behold who you are. You are I are God's family. Flesh and blood. God's own. Flawed and sinful. Blessed and forgiven. Known and loved. Peter said: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."