

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: John 6:35, 41-59

Sermon Title: "What Have We Been Eating Lately?" (Trekking through the Gospel of John)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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We happen to be walking through Piedmont Park in downtown Atlanta, one summer day. The sun is bright and shiny with only a few puffy clouds in the sky. As we cross the stone bridge that extends over the pond – the same bridge with the gazebo at one side – we hear sounds coming from the other end of the park. Piedmont is known for having events such as the Atlanta Jazz Festival and Green concerts, so maybe there is something going on that we'd like to see. We move into that area, and discover a man standing in a large circle of people with microphone in hand. He seems to be preaching.

"I am living bread that came down from heaven," he says. "If anyone eats this bread, that person will live forever!" What do we think about that? Do we even know what he is talking about, "living bread from heaven"? We notice that people are looking around this man in search of a table full of bread. Is this man giving out real bread, and if so it is white, wheat, rye, or gluten-free.

Then the man says something totally off the wall: "I tell you the truth, unless you eat my flesh and drink

my blood, you have no life in you.” What was that? “My flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink?” Did we just walk into the middle of a vampire convention or something? Is this man one of the actors in *Twilight* or *True Blood*? We notice people’s faces, and some of them are not taking the idea of flesh and blood as food as an appetizing dietary plan. The women put their hands on their chests and gasp loudly. The men shake their heads and starting joking with their buddies about what the man just said. The children simply say, “Ugh! That’s yucky!”

We just read a story about Jesus speaking to a crowd of people. Jesus makes strange claims about himself. “My flesh is real food,” he says. “My blood, real drink.” The people in the crowd, mostly Jews who know something about their scriptures, hear Jesus. They are not only disgusted but completely offended. Just take the idea of eating blood for a start. The Law of God says the Jews should never eat the blood of animals, because it is the lifeline of the creature. Anyone who eats the lifeline of any animal shall be cut off from the community, treated as an outcast.¹ Even today Rabbis inspect various meats in order to declare them to be kosher or not.

¹ Cf. Leviticus 7:26-27.

And then, take the “flesh as food” part next. Anybody knows that you do not eat human flesh. If there are Greeks in the crowd, they would immediately cast off Jesus’ words, because cannibalism was an offense against nature itself. It was an offense against civilization. Some of their myths talk about such grotesque acts, even the story about Cronus who was the father of Zeus, and Cronus eating his children as they were being born, because he feared one of them might overthrow him as a powerful deity. The Greeks were disgusted to think that one of their gods could stoop to a low level. They would talk about the Minotaur on the island of Crete, who would eat every prisoner that was trapped in his labyrinth. The Greeks told this story of the Minotaur to scare the heck out of each other. Even today the subject of cannibalism sickens us, and we don’t want to think about it.

Jesus knows the Law of God perfectly – he has come as the Son of God to fulfill God’s law. So, he shouldn’t be talking about such offensive things, right? He shouldn’t ask people to do something that is downright revolting. The people hear his words, and they grumble. What kind of prophet is this? Is he a madman or what? Why make such outrageous claims, unless he is mad?

That's a good question. Why does Jesus make such outrageous claims about himself? What point is he trying to prove? All stories and messages in Scripture were written for spiritual purposes. No matter how hard Jesus' claim of being our food and drink is hard to stomach (pun intended), Jesus shares those words for a reason: for our spiritual survival.

When Jesus says these words in Chapter 6, he is pointing to sections of the Old Testament that speak about tasting the sweetness of the Lord. These are sections the people in the crowd should have known. In Psalm 119, the psalmist writes, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth." The prophet Isaiah once said, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness." We have all heard the words from Psalm 34, "O taste and see that the LORD is good! Happy is [the one] who takes refuge in him!"²

The last verse should have come to the minds of the people, as Jesus spoke about flesh and blood as food: Taste and see that the Lord is good." The Hebrews verses are saying, "Hey, there is Something you should try that is really, really good. It doesn't

² Psalm 119:103; Isaiah 55:2; and Psalm 34:8.

come from anything we can do for ourselves or others. It doesn't come from any of our favorite foods such as hotdog and hamburgers, steak and potatoes, potato chips and pretzels and popcorn.

That "Something" is the Lord God Almighty. Only he can satisfy our spirits. Only he will bring delight to your heart, clarity to your minds, and peace and strength to your bodies. He gives direction and meaning. Touch. Taste. See that the Lord is good. You will be filled to capacity.

Before Jesus talks about himself, he had a crowd of people following him everywhere. They saw him performing many great miracles, and they wanted more. Jesus taught them many things about God and the Son of God, and the people wanted more. The hour drew late, and Jesus wondered if there is any food around to give to the large multitude. John tells us at the beginning of Chapter 6 there were about 5000 men in the group, but a good portion of them probably brought their wives and children, so the number was really closer to 15,000 or 20,000. Everybody sat down, Jesus took five barley loaves and two small fish and divided them, and 20,000 people were fed. This was a great miracle. The all-you-can-eat buffet was open. O, taste and see that Jesus'

bread and fish are the best in Judea.

But then, things got a bit dicey. The people wanted to make Jesus their king.³ He had fed them, and people will do anything for food. Jesus and his disciples had to make a hasty retreat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee before things got out of hand. The people wanted him to be their king, because of a few scraps of food. Food is important to any of us – if we go without it for more than a week, we will die. But food such as bread or fish is not what we should be striving for. We cannot live on bread alone, or even on steaks and pizza and shrimp and peanut butter sandwiches alone. Jesus knows this. He fed the people barley bread and small fish, because he himself is the Source of all our good. He is our living Bread who satisfies all desires. He is our Cup of Salvation who eliminates all thirsts. “You need me, people,” Jesus says to the crowds later on.

They were so geared up to find where Jesus went, that they followed him to the other side of the Sea and asked for him. Jesus said, “You didn’t come for me because I gave you pieces of bread and fillets of fish. You are not seeking those thing; you are seeking me. You need me, don’t you realize? The fish and bread perish either by being eaten or by sitting around in the

³ Cf. John 6:15.

hot sun. They will vanish. I will never vanish. Search for the food and drink that endures for eternity.

“Eat my flesh, people. Drink my blood. Take me in as your everlasting nourishment. Absorb me as your Savior, and follow me to the ends of the world. Taste and see that the Lord is good through me. Happy are we who find our refuge in him.”⁴

Did we catch what Jesus says to the crowd after making his wild statement about flesh and blood? In John 6:53, he says, “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, *you have no life in you.*” These last words are important.

John wrote a book that deals with deep spiritual matters. The other gospel writers wrote about spiritual matters too, but when we read through John’s Gospel we seem to go even deeper in and farther back. We find a more intimate connection with our God. It’s almost like being invited into the Holy of Holies, the forbidden home of God, in order to spend some time with God.

John started his book with Christ coming into the world as flesh, not as a spirit or as an idea but as a human being.⁵ God the Son has direct contact with God’s creation, becoming so involved with it as to put

⁴ This is a paraphrase of the conversation found in John 6:25-40.

⁵ John 1:14.

on a “mortal coil” as Shakespeare once put it, and live with us in all our sufferings and successes.

Jesus speaks about being born from above, being reborn of water and Spirit and not of flesh. This is another way to describe the intimacy Jesus is talking about, such intimacy that God the Father wants to have with his creation. In John 4, Jesus speaks with a woman at a well about having living water that never runs dry. He tells her that anybody who drinks of this water will actually have a fountain of water springing up forever from within him or her.⁶ A fountain of God’s love and grace and strength and joy will constantly run within that person, every day, every night. And then we come to John 6, when Jesus talks about his body and blood being real food. Again, strong and lasting connections are what Jesus is talking about. Christ coming to us as one of us, talking about water and Spirit flowing ceaselessly within.

We are never so close to something or somebody, until we take them in, make them a part of our whole being. We take in Jesus Christ, not such much through the mouth but through the ears and through the heart. Christ penetrates our minds and emotions, and influences our words and actions, and molds our

⁶ Cf. John 4:14.

lives in such ways as to live for him.

If we don't take in Jesus as he says we should, then we won't have any life. If we do not taste, then we will never see how good the Lord is. We have to take Christ in, deep within. C.S. Lewis once said that we were made by God, just as a man may build an engine. "A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other."⁷

My body, real food. My blood, real drink. Tough words to get our heads around, but some people find it tougher to accept them and actually do what Jesus says than to understand them.

Nothing can fill us like Christ. No amount of chocolate milk shakes or Oreo cookies or steak or potatoes is going to sustain our bodies and minds and spirits in the way Christ himself can. No amount of TV or videogames or texting, or good ideas or strong opinions can nourish us like Jesus' words and promises.

In Christ we not only survive. We thrive. And we definitely want more in this life than just survive. We

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

want to thrive. We want life, abundant, magnificent, unending life; and so we change our diets, less worldly junk food and more spiritual whole food. St. Augustine once said, “Believe and thou hast eaten.”⁸

⁸ F.F. Bruce, *Hard Sayings of Jesus*, 23.