

What Shall We Eat?

Psalm 34:8 O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

Ephesians 5:15-17 Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil.¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. **John 6:51-58** 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."⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"⁵³ So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;

⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.⁵⁸ 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."

What Shall We Eat?

What shall we eat? For many of us, the question that pops up all the time is "What should I eat?" or maybe we think of it more as "What is it I should not eat – and is there anything left that I like to eat? Are you like me: whenever you think about something you shouldn't eat, you suddenly have a craving for it? What would happen if you were told that you should really cut way back on bread – and you need to avoid high fat things like mayonnaise, and butter, and cheese – and you've just got to give up fried food? Makes you really want a grilled cheese sandwich right about now, doesn't it? It's not an unusual response. We call this sort of thing a matter of forbidden fruit. It doesn't always work that way. I tried to tell our son Bill that he was forbidden to eat tomatoes and he was delighted!

Today's passage from the gospel according to John is pretty repulsive sounding! Jesus said, "Eat my flesh and drink my blood!" What's more, he's really emphatic about it. He said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." Where we read "very truly" in English, the original Greek says, "amen, amen" the word "amen" means "let it be so." In churches where the congregation is awake enough and engaged enough to talk back during the sermon, sometimes someone will call out "Amen!" That's a correct use of the word. Amen! That's right! That's the way things should be! So when Jesus begins a sentence with two "amens" in a row, he's repeating the word for greater emphasis – amen, amen – this is absolutely true, this is most emphatically what must be done.

Eating human flesh is repulsive. It's just as scandalous in our culture today as it was in Hebrew life at the time of Jesus. For one thing, it strongly implies human sacrifice and that was forbidden in the strongest terms. Drinking blood – any blood - was forbidden repeatedly in Jewish law. (Leviticus 3:17; 7:26; and 17:12; Deuteronomy 12:16 and 12:23) In fact, in Genesis 9: 1-6, after the flood, Noah and his family and all their descendants were forbidden to eat blood. So it is unimaginable that Jesus who said, "I haven't come to destroy the law," would emphatically demand that people disobey the law.

This scripture (and others) are often quoted to support the concept that at the Lord's Table when we receive communion, the bread and juice become the flesh and blood of Jesus. Or, at least, that this is all about symbolically drinking Christ's blood and eating his body. Well, that may be true about this passage of scripture, but I wonder if we aren't taking this passage as literally as we dare to avoid the demands that this passage would place on us if we understood it metaphorically or symbolically.

We use the expression "flesh and blood" to refer to our parents and our children. We might say something like, "If he's that unfeeling toward his own flesh and blood, imagine how he must treat strangers." In the Hebrew culture of Jesus, the expression "flesh and blood" emphasized bodily

presence. Here in John's gospel, the writer has told us in the first chapter that the "Word became flesh and dwelled among us," that is, God entered human flesh and blood and lived here on earth in the human body of Jesus. The fancy word for that is incarnation, "in the flesh." God's spirit was in a human body. Jesus was truly human and truly divine.

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came from heaven." He's drawing a parallel with the manna that God supplied the Hebrew people as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Just as the manna from heaven was bread to sustain and nourish the wandering Hebrews, so is Jesus the heavenly bread that sustains and nourishes us. Jesus taught by word and action. Jesus didn't hold back in his compassion. He devoted himself - his life - his flesh and blood - to serving others. He was constantly relieving suffering by feeding, healing, and comforting people. He taught by example, but he also taught through parables and preaching.

But the metaphor of eating Jesus' flesh and blood as a way of saying that we are to follow his actions and his teaching still seems pretty strange. But think about it. When we don't believe what somebody says, we say, "I'm sorry, but I just can't swallow that." When someone believes what they're told, especially if it's something atrocious, we say that they "took it hook, line, and sinker." The psalmist said, "O taste and see that the Lord is good." Similarly, Jesus said, "Take me hook, line, and sinker."

The reading from the letter written to the church in Ephesus speaks to this same issue. Those folks were told, "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." Notice that the emphasis here isn't on knowing what to believe, but on what to do. The people who were the church in Ephesus were told, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise." At the beginning of this fifth chapter of Ephesians, we are told to "Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us." (Ephesians 5:1-2 NRS) So, we are being urged to be wise, not foolish, and we are made wise by understanding and imitating God. Christian wisdom is tricky business, however, because it is counterintuitive. It isn't always what we expect. Paul was clear about this when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth and said, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom." (1 Corinthians 1:20 and 25) God's wisdom appears foolish to human beings, but it's the world's so-called wisdom that turns out to be foolish. All of this means that we can't just assume what God wants us to do, we have to study and learn, because we might foolishly assume that what seems wise and obvious to us is God's will.

On top of all of this is a sense of some urgency. The Ephesians are urged to make "the most of the time, because the days are evil." Those days were evil, to be sure. Rome ruled the Empire with an iron fist. Taxes were extremely high, far higher than anything we experience today. Those who wouldn't worship Caesar were unpatriotic and that was a punishable offense. The rich were exceedingly rich and they were a tiny percentage of the population. Everyone else was a slave or very deeply obligated to and dependent upon the good will of the rich. There was idol worship everywhere.

A lot of people would say that today's times are evil, too. There certainly are a lot of idols being worshipped today. The list of idols includes ever more luxurious cars, bigger and bigger housing, longer vacations in expensive setting, dark hair and perfect bodies, and lots of complicated electronic toys that claim to make life easier and gratification instantaneous.

The folks in Ephesus were told that because the times were evil, they should make the most of their time - use their time wisely. Use their time to seek God's wisdom, seek understanding. Drink from the fount of true knowledge. Take Jesus hook, line, and sinker. Or, to use a metaphor that Paul used, begin by drinking the milk of God's Word, and then go on to be nourished even further and grow stronger by chewing on the meat of the word.

So, how are we using our time? What are we eating? I'd suggest to you that a diet heavy in late night TV could have too much meringue and lack enough nutrition. A life spent heavily in entertainment might be too sugary and lack enough spiritual exercise. A heavy focus on physical exercise can leave the mind too little time for seeking wisdom. Do we find it easier to get up early to

exercise our bodies than we do to get up in time for Sunday school to exercise our minds? Can we find time for the game – but not for service to the church? How much time and energy do we use in seeking entertainment – and how much is devoted to seeking God’s wisdom? Are we finding time to read, but seldom reading to increase our knowledge of God’s relationship with his children?

We are invited and encouraged to swallow the lessons of Jesus’ life and the teaching of his lips, hook, line, and sinker. O taste and see that the Lord is good. Take big bites and really be nourished!
Amen.