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John 6:51-58

“Eat Me?”

Michael Stanfield

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 Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ 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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 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.’ *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray: O lord bless these ancient words on the page that you inspired that they might kindle the living Word they were intended to engender in our hearts. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.*

I grew up in a little Methodist church where they said the Apostle’s Creed every Sunday. I, therefore, like many of you who did the same, know it by heart. For those of you who didn’t or those who may have grown up in traditions where it was never said, it goes like this:

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, his only son, our lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. He descended into Hell. The third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the father almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the Dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen”

Major tenets of the Christian faith – right? Sacrosanct. Indisputable bedrocks on which the Church is founded.

Then why is it that in every Church I have served since seminary, I have had good, loving, faithful, Presbyterians – Presbyterians who take the authority of scripture seriously, mind you, who yet have come to me privately to confess that they could not, in good faith say this affirmation of faith in a service of worship because they could not, in all honesty say they believed everything espoused there. Nor were they ever likely to believe in those things. So, during that part of the service, they all have said, they just don’t open their mouths. It’s true.

Usually among their strongest objections are belief in Mary as a Virgin and the resurrection of their own flesh and blood bodies.

However, upon further inquiry, what I have almost always discovered is that it is not that they cannot accept these things as true, period. It is that they cannot accept them as true, literally. In other words, it is the way they were taught to perceive of Truth that is their real issue.

I am not sure most people are even aware that there are, in fact, two distinct ways of perceiving Truth – ways that are, in reality, equal in value and validity but operate on very different principles – with literal Truth being arrived at through the reductionist study of matter using the empirical method and Truth being arrived at through the study of inner phenomena that arises spontaneously in the psyches of individual persons or of a people – that is religious ideas and symbols.

Truth by way of symbols verses material or literal truth. Truth that insists that that cross points to the reality of God verses Truth that insists that that is nothing but wood crafted in the form of a small “t”.

Well what I want to say is that both are absolutely true at the same time and these truths do not cancel each other out.

However, we live in an empirically driven, materialistic world. This means that literal Truth is generally accepted as being superior to Truth arrived at through the symbolic – even by Most Christians.

Whether Christian or not, we tend to view the symbolic as the lesser way to approach Truth even though it is the primary way Religious Truth is both imparted and apprehended soul to soul.

And the problem comes when religious truth conveyed by symbols is either pitted against literal truth or the two are manipulated to fit each other in a way that is both absurd and even obscene to those of us in the West who live on this side of the Enlightenment and choose not to set aside our brains in the name of “faith”.

Examples of pitting one against the other abound – as when some Christians insist on the universe only being 6000 years old and that life came into being spontaneously so that it jives with the account in Genesis, when the evidence of science overwhelmingly demonstrates that the cosmos is billions of years old and that life evolved on earth over millions of years.

And examples of absurd manipulations are all across cable TV – like those which attempt to prove the existence of the Garden of Eden by trying to find its place on earth or those which attempt to prove the historicity of Noah by finding physical evidence of his ark.

But the thing is, when I affirm the creation story and the flood as deep religious Truth – along with the Virginity of Mary, and the bodily resurrection, I don’t have to posit that as literal truth. The creation story and the flood convey to me something of the mystery of ultimate reality in a way that tells me something about its gracious, wonder-filled make-up. The statement of Mary’s Virginity affirms for me that the Christ comes into the world by both the most extraordinary, and at the same time, most ordinary of means. For me, that is more than enough. My faith does not depend on the defense of any of that as a literal Truth.

Likewise, when I affirm the resurrection of my body through Christ, I affirm my hope in Christ that death will not have the last word even on my rotting flesh – that through connection with Christ, my ego that was incarnate in this present body will be found to have life in some other bodily form that I cannot now imagine.

In other words what statements like the Apostle's Creed attempt to express is deep mystery using the best language possible and that language is the language of myth and symbol – the very language of religion and the soul. Rather than defend these statements as expressions of literal Truth only, we should be inviting outsiders to experience the deep mystery that we have experienced personally through our faith in the Truth and what a difference that has made in our lives.

Gone are the days when the Church can rely on people swallowing whole what they don't really understand just because some religious authority figure tells them it is so or when we can attract people to the good news of Christ by somehow proving to them with some perfect argument that it's all literally true.

If what is said in the Apostle's Creed is not a living experience in me then it's all just words anyway. In fact, you know that a religion is in trouble when it has to use power and authority to enforce its tenets and that everything it espouses has to be taken as literally true – or else.

...which brings us to our text from John. The Jewish Religion was in trouble when Jesus came along. They took the literal interpretation of scripture for granted and so, they and the people of that era were barely able to understand anything Jesus said because so much of the language he used was symbolic.

The crowds in John's gospel were only coming back to Jesus really to get another meal. He had fed them once and they hoped He would do it again. But instead, he turns to talking about eating human flesh and drinking blood and everybody loses their appetite. And you have to remember that the crowd Jesus was addressing had not had the privilege of having been taught about Holy Communion and its symbolism as we have today. They did not get what they came for and were completely repulsed by what was offered.

Even His disciples say, "This is a hard saying. Who can listen to it?" Then they too leave.

In fact, the Greek word used in verses 54, 56, and 58 for "eat" is *trogein*. It is a verb normally used to indicate eating like an animal. It means to tear apart flesh and have a feeding frenzy. Not a meal, but a devouring is referred to here. The Church has made sense of John 6:51-58 through the years by understanding these verses in light of Holy Communion. But the crowd hearing them on that day did not have this luxury. And so, the symbolic language of Jesus is the most offensive from the perspective of the world, but is really closest to the heart of the matter from the perspective of religious faith...

Dreams have always played a significant part in my spiritual and psychological life and development. I often hesitate to speak about this much because the general attitude of dreams is that that they are nothing but... nothing but random neurons firing after we are asleep... nothing

but the irrational silliness that is the result of indigestion. Again that's the material or literal Truth attempting to trump a spiritual or psychological truth. But I have come to understand even religion itself as the waking dream of a whole people. It marks the sacred facts of what is really going on at the mysterious farthest reaches of conscious reality that cannot be expressed any other way.

I tell you this because one of the things I have learned in my study of dreams about the symbolism of eating is that, at heart it signifies something important that we are either in the process of integrating or in need of integrating into our lives – into who we are – into our often once sided attitudes and opinions about life, Others and God. Dreams that involve eating are usually most significant and bare paying special attention to. What we consume in terms of ideas, thoughts, attitudes, and experiences, is what we become.

In the gospel of John, up until Chapter six, *believing* was required for entrance into fullness of life, the eternal; but now Jesus says, “He who gnaws on my flesh and drinks my blood shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

These poor folks just wanted their physical need for bread met again; but Jesus proclaims His desire to be embodied within them in the most graphic terms possible. He literally runs them off just as they returned to continue feeding at his trough. Why would He do this? People are coming back for more bread to the one who fed them before and He disgusts them. What is going on?

Could Christianity really be about something other than just believing? Could Christianity really be about becoming more Christ-like?

We *are* to eat the flesh of Jesus and drink his blood; but its meaning is spiritual: we are to integrate the very life of Christ into who we are so that it becomes a living experience in us that is plain for all to see...

Karl Wallenda, the high wire walker, who never used a safety net, said about six weeks before he died in a fall from the wire: “Walking the wire is living. Everything else is just waiting.” (Susan Ketchin, *The Christ -Haunted Landscape*, University Press of Mississippi, 1994, p.341)

“Walking the wire is living. Everything else is just waiting.” That pretty much sums up being a disciple of Jesus. Becoming like Jesus is living. Like walking a high wire without a net, it is dangerous. But everything else is just belief and does not really require all that much from you.

Talk of belief only keeps me in my head and often leads me nowhere. If I have just believed and not completely swallowed Christ, even what I do may end up being hollow and lifeless.

The great Trappist monk Thomas Merton once said (and I am paraphrasing), “Whoever attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening the kind of self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity for love, that belonged to Jesus himself, will not have anything to give others.”

Taking the 12 inch journey from one's head to one's heart with Jesus is the difference between being a spectator and being a gladiator in the ring of life.

True, belief in God can be shared. But the wisdom of the living Christ must be swallowed and embodied. Having Jesus enter one's life—one's own flesh and blood—is not simply to gain a mentor, rather it is to embody Jesus. "For me to live is Christ." said Paul, "to die is gain."

A wonderful example of this embodiment can be found in the film, *The Bread, My Sweet*. It centers on Dominic Pyzola, a leader in the shark-infested world of corporate buy-outs. Working from his swank office high up in one of Pittsburgh's glass towers, his job is to analyze each new acquisition his firm makes and decide who is to be fired—always as many as possible so that the bottom line will look good.

Dominic has another life, however, one centering on a small Italian bakery he has bought, mainly to keep his two, less ambitious brothers employed. Here he interacts with down to earth customers, and even more, with the elderly former owners Bella and Massimo, who still live above the bakery and come in to bake from time to time. The two become his surrogate parents, and their values, that include respect for other people, are baked right into the bread that Dominic eats. And so, that regular "eating" at the hands of Bella and Massimo begins to affect him.

In the meantime, Dominic is made a partner in the firm; but now, he no longer cherishes this richly rewarding promotion. When his board asks him when he is going to announce the next round of firings at their most recent acquisition, he responds that it is just three days before Christmas.

"So what?" is the gist of his colleagues' replies. But Dominic no longer has the luxury of thinking that way, affected as he has become by the scandalous bread of connection that Bella and Massimo have been serving. Dominic has been changed by that eating. He now is pulled toward the deeper things of life which include Bella's sharing with him her secret that she is dying from an inoperable tumor.

Bella's daughter has returned home and now the bread in Dominic transferred to him by Bella makes itself known – as Dominic, on Bella's behalf convinces the daughter to follow through with her plans for a marriage, because it had been the old woman's greatest dream to see her only child wedded and ready to raise a family before she dies.

Dominic tells the young woman that he can think of nothing now but wanting to do this something for someone *else* who is so deserving of love and joy. Slowly but surely the bread of Bella, the bread of life, has had a profound effect on Dominic.

In fact it finally leads him to give up his lucrative career and become a full-time baker—and thus full-time human being. His old, acquisitive values are replaced by ones very much like those of Jesus because, well because, in a sense he has eaten the flesh of Jesus and drunk his blood – and he has indeed become what he has eaten...

And so, I invite you, like Dominic, to gnaw on Jesus – not just swallowing a set of beliefs about Jesus, but eating on Jesus himself – doing whatever it takes to make you into a full whole human being – like Jesus. And connecting to those who have been eating the bread of life for some time – those who are a part of your family, friends, and community of faith is a good place to start

while you remember also these words of Jesus: “Ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door and the door to gnawing on Jesus will be open to you.”

Let us pray. Loving God, we are good at believing in you, but not always up to the task of feeding on you. Help us to find ways to feast on you – to take in your wholeness so that we may be whole – to become full human beings so that we, like Jesus can inspire full human beingness in people who feel starved about their lives. (partial quote from Chogyam Trungpa)

And now bless these gifts that others may find it safe and inviting to gnaw on you as well. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.