

Sermon for Sunday, August 15, 2021 - "Consuming God"

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Jesus as the bread of life is a beautiful, powerful metaphor, but does anyone else feel they've had their fill of it? This is the fifth Sunday that we've heard this theme. Today, more bread isn't the only thing that seems a little much, a little excessive. Jesus says some really strange things. He says, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." And twice he talks about, "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood." If you heard these words without any context, you'd have to assume Jesus was talking about cannibalism. These are really unappetizing words.

I think I'll always remember that this passage was the assigned scripture for my first Sunday as pastor here six years ago. I really didn't want to start my ministry here thinking about flesh-eating followers of Jesus. I much prefer more palatable teachings about love and service and being kind.

No wonder Jesus' first hearers disputed among themselves, asking, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" How can this be? If we spend a lot of time around the church, we sometimes forget how strange Jesus' words are, until we put ourselves in the place of someone who hasn't domesticated or spiritualized them. If we hear these words, as if for the first time, we realize that Jesus is making some pretty radical claims. Jesus is saying the God of the universe has come, in the flesh, so that we can consume God. And that's pretty intense. Do we really want a God who is that close, that intimately involved in our lives?

This isn't a God who's just icing on the top of a good life, a light, fluffy, unobtrusive God. This is a God who wants to get under our skin, burrow within us, and seep into every nook and cranny of our beings. This is not a God who stays at a safe distance sending down teachings, ideas, and motivation. This is a God who wants to get into every aspect of our lives. It almost sounds like God wants to consume us, to claim us, and change us from the inside out.

That's not the kind of God we'd likely choose off a menu. This is not a comfort food God - warm, fuzzy, not too demanding. A God who wants to be consumed and consume us is not all that appealing. And yet, the good news of Jesus is that God doesn't wait until we desire or accept or believe or understand any of this. God just comes to us in Jesus. And Jesus gives his very self to feed us with what we most need.

God knows that on our own, we don't choose what we really need. We consume so many empty calories. We seek fulfillment in all sorts of things that leave us wanting. So, Jesus helps us to see how hungry and thirsty we are and awakens our yearning for God. God knows that we are so often consumed by things that drain our life - consumed by worries, fears, anger, stress. So, Jesus helps us identify what's eating at us and sets us free from it. Jesus draws us into God's all-consuming forgiveness, love, and abundance.

God also knows that our patterns of consumption keep us focused inwards on our wants and pleasures. So, Jesus comes to turn us outward towards our neighbor and creation, so that our lives will nurture others. This is a joyful, life-giving way of being that nourishes us and all that God has made.

Jesus gives himself so that we might have what we really need. Jesus does this in all the ways he has promised. Jesus does this when two or three are gathered in his name, online or in person. When we worship in Jesus' name we become more than we are as individual parts. We become Christ's body for each other and the world. Through this beautiful, broken, beloved body of Christ, God challenges us, gets under our skin, disturbs us, and at the same time loves, feeds, blesses and transforms us. There are many, many times that the body of Christ in the whole church and in this congregation is not what we'd prefer. But it is just what we need to receive abundant life and to be a life-giving presence in the world.

Jesus, the Word made flesh, also meets us as we hear and reflect on the words of scripture, as we sing, make music, pray and share in silence. In all these ways Jesus frees and feeds us. And Jesus comes to us in the bread and wine saying, "This is my body, this is my blood given for you." He doesn't wait to see if we believe this or feel something about this. Jesus simply meets us where we are in a way that we can touch, smell, taste and see - in a way that can get into us.

Jesus also meets us out in the world, in the creation that feeds us, and in those the world considers least and the last. Jesus promises that how we treat those in need is how we treat him. Jesus is present in, with and among us, giving us what we need even if it's not always what we'd choose.

Through Jesus' presence, God gets under our skin.
God transforms us from the inside out.

Let's take a moment of silent prayer.