

“How much of Jesus can we handle?”

August 16, 2009

Text: Psalm 34:11-18, John 6:51-58

I.

Life is messy. Isn't it true? It's complicated and messy ... and more so all the time. The wonders of advanced technology are countless but they haven't rendered our lives less complicated and made us less anxious along the way.

I don't know about you, but I like things to work. I'm not into cars at all; I just want them to work. I want to be able to count on my car functioning. Don't you? And when it doesn't, I get frustrated.

It's the same with home appliances. I'm not much good at repairing any of them and when they malfunction and don't work, it messes up my day. Think of the time (to say nothing of the expense involved) we spend dealing with our automobiles and appliances ... trying to keep them operative and up to date.

This past week, our air conditioner malfunctioned. Ouch! Not good news in South Florida. The first thing I knew, we had puddles of water throughout the garage and, clearly, the AC wasn't cooling properly.

- This was also the week when some insects decided to attack my front lawn;
- when a couple of sprinkler heads got mauled by the workers who mow the lawn;
- and the week when the handle came off the microwave in the kitchen; we had to open it with pliers until we found the right glue.

Worse yet, in my office at church, the microphone on my computer decided not to work which meant I couldn't use the SKYPE phone service to call my daughter, Natasha, in England. As most of you know, she's pregnant and is due any day. Major frustration!

Everywhere, it seemed, messiness! Things not working. In the big picture, of course, this is all utterly trivial; I know that. But it reminds us that life can be messy.

II.

In some ways, the message of the gospel of **John**, too, is messy. In **John**, Jesus isn't his neat and tidy self all the time. Most of John, as we've noted before, is symbolic language; it's rich metaphor, like the first words in the reading I just shared:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

What is that about? *Living bread* coming down from heaven? And talk of the bread being his flesh. Messy stuff!

We'd much prefer the Jesus of the synoptic gospels, wouldn't we—Matthew, Mark and Luke? The Jesus that is out there doing good, amazing people everywhere he goes—with his healings and miracles and teachings; telling the most impressive parables, and always a step ahead, it seems, of the scheming Pharisees.

He's taking on the values of empire (the Roman empire), to be sure, but it's more manageable in these first three gospels. **John** definitely takes us to a new awareness and to a new realization.

What we discover in John's gospel is that being a follower of Jesus is not just a head thing—with our progressive theologies and enlightened ways of understanding Jesus and presenting him to the world.

Or with our notions of the *pre-Easter Jesus* vs. the *post-Easter Jesus*. Or Jesus as a Jewish mystic, a religious revolutionary, or Jesus as God's Messiah.

People like me love all this talk of theology and Christology. We love reading about it, thinking about it, and writing about it; and certainly, there's a place for it. In many ways, it helps us understand God's purposes and what our faith is about.

But, still, it's all abstract and safe. It's in our heads, in our minds; it's an intellectualizing of Jesus. Again, not a bad thing, but ...

But, the gospel of John takes us deeper. The thing about this 4th gospel is that, if we can stick with it—through all of its sometimes-baffling language and metaphor—there's always more, more that meets the eye. Again and again, there's more.

III.

The metaphors in our reading this morning are graphic and intriguing. Check them out:

... 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 true drink ...

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

It's hard not to have an immediate aversion to these words: *Eating my flesh; drinking my blood*. Some of us might find that repugnant. What's John's gospel talking about?

And it's not just us asking these questions. Check out the disciples' reaction in this same 6th chapter:

*When many of his disciples heard it (this teaching), they said, **This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?***

Jesus is aware that this is a troubling teaching. And actually, as the gospel of John tells us, some of Jesus' followers turned back and no longer went with him. So Jesus asked the TWELVE:

*Do you also wish to go away? Right away, Peter jumps in: **But to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.***

The point is: not only for us, but even for Jesus' own followers, this is messy stuff. **How much of Jesus can we handle?**

IV.

But let's stick with the metaphors here, *eating Jesus' flesh* and *drinking his blood*. What John is calling us to is a closeness to Jesus that is beyond words and beyond reason; to the point where our life and faith live in and through him; because all that he is, is in us.

If we push this enough, what we're left with is a powerful calling to lives of compassion and love. Why? Because that's the larger meaning of Jesus' life. That's what his deeds and teachings and commitments were about on the deepest level—compassion and justice for all people. And if he is *in* us, then his values and commitments are in us, too.

If we can reconcile these deeper promptings from **John 6**, we can move quickly to Paul's affirmation in **Galatians 2**:

And it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

Consider the implications, here! When Christ lives in us, to the point where his compassion becomes *our* compassion and his justice, *our* justice ... i.e., when he truly lives IN us ... our lives can't help but be transformed.

I mean, how could they NOT be?

When we *eat of his flesh* and *drink of his blood*, when He lives in us, compassion and love and a commitment to justice for all people are going to drive our lives and influence the decisions we make. And, more and more, we'll be pressed to come to terms with **How much Jesus can we handle?**

In a reflection on this text, **Methodist Bishop, William Willimon** observes:

Ah, wouldn't the Christian faith be easier if it were a matter of mere belief or intellectual assent! Apparently, today's scandalously, incarnational gospel reminds us that Jesus wants all of us, body and soul. His truth wants to burrow deeply within us, to consume us as we consume him ...and to flow through our veins ... to be digested ...and to nourish every nook and cranny of our being.

V.

What's truthful for us in today's reading is that we're called to lives where Christ is alive and active IN us. And where does that lead us?

Clearly, to lives that overflow with compassion and love ... and therefore with a commitment to fairness and justice for all people. What would Jesus think about the current national debate on Health Care Reform? Check it out!

Can you imagine Jesus or the Old Testament prophets leaving anyone out, outside the Health Care system? They were universalists. For them God was the God of all people and every human life was sacred in God's sight.

- With this in mind, however we ultimately work this out, doesn't every human deserve health care?
- If we are truly *in Christ*, how can we NOT advocate for universal health coverage so that no person has to endure the indignity of being excluded or of not qualifying for a much-needed treatment?

As this national debate marches on, let us remember that—in the Bible there is always a preferential option for the poor. There simply IS; it leaps out at us throughout the Bible.

In the upside down world of Jesus where we're exhorted (however symbolically) to *eat his body and drink his blood* ... and where *the first shall be last and the last shall be first* (a teaching that echoes throughout the gospel stories), wouldn't the poor would be moved to the front of the line.

In this scenario, where do we think the 46 million without health coverage would go in our Health Care reform process? **How much Jesus can we handle?**

VI.

Talk about messiness, Health Care reform is as messy as you can get. It's complicated and there are no easy solutions. Still, we have to do something.

1. Not only for moral reasons, around justice concerns ...

2. But also for economic reasons ... our current health care system can't be sustained beyond the next five to ten years.

Life CAN be messy.

1. Things don't always fall neatly into place ...
2. All the time, things are happening that we don't expect or anticipate ...
3. And life is NOT always fair or just ...

So, what do we do? We keep hanging in there ... giving it our best ... going the second mile. We keep trying to find common ground ... negotiating, talking to one another, caring for one another.

And we do this in the knowledge and faith that when our lives are defined by compassion and justice—the deepest values of Jesus—we make a difference; and in the midst of all the imperfection and chaos, there's rejoicing in heaven.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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