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### MEETING THE INCARNATE GOD

I'll confess there are times when I read the text for the coming Sunday, I sometimes think the Bible has precious little to do with real life.

- I mean, here we are, stuck in the middle of this conversation—no, really an argument—between JESUS and the crowd who were following HIM.
  - And what raises that question about real life for me this week is JESUS' words about bread from heaven and HIS rather grotesque assertions about eating HIS flesh and drinking HIS blood.
  - Sounds more like cannibalism than theology, doesn't it?

Biblical scholars tell us that behind these verses a controversy raged in the early Church about the nature and importance of the LORD's Supper.

- And it's one of the controversies that John tried to settle in this gospel.
  - It's not just the early Church, either, because this debate continues between denominations even today.
  - Do we place the emphasis on the words, "Do this in remembrance?"
  - Or do we find its real meaning in the words, "This is MY body? This is MY blood.?"
  - So, with this discourse, John tries to help us understand the real meaning of the meal of the LORD's Table.

Nevertheless, as I considered the works of those Biblical scholars, from Augustine to Luther to some of my own seminary professors, there rose inside me that question: "So what!?"

- What does this talk of flesh and blood and heavenly bread have to do with the ins and outs, the ups and downs, of everyday living?
- What does it have to do with our hopes and fears, loves and hates, our living and dying?
- What does it have to do with us, here and now, two thousand years later, struggling just to make ends meet?

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When I come to a biblical text, you see, I don't come for academic or theological controversy, but rather to find counsel and comfort in dealing with this life.

- And even more, I come to the text for meaning.
  - Not meaning in the sense of answering all my questions, but meaning which makes life worth living.

So, like the crowds in today's lesson, I also find myself a bit frustrated with JESUS' abstract words about eating and drinking HIS body and blood when what we really need is something more concrete, solid, and meaningful.

- "How can this man give HIS flesh?" the crowds rightly ask.
- In other words, "Stop talking nonsense, JESUS. We need something a little better than your empty, abstract, metaphorical promises."

But to this angry demand, JESUS responds by insisting, like a stubborn child, on the point HE has already made.

- "I am telling you the truth," HE says, both to the crowds gathered around HIM in Capernaum and to us gathered as this congregation.
- "I'm telling you the truth: if you do not eat the flesh of the SON OF MAN and drink HIS blood, you will not have life in yourselves.
  - "Whoever eats MY flesh and drinks MY blood has eternal life....For MY flesh is the real food; MY blood is the real drink."

And then, suddenly, upon hearing these words the crowd both then and now realize that HE's serious.

- HE's not being metaphorical or speaking abstractly.
  - HE truly means it.
    - This ONE, JESUS, would give up HIS flesh to eat and HIS blood to drink to any and all who want it.
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Upon hearing it the crowds in Capernaum shrink back because what JESUS is speaking about has always been regarded as an abomination by the law and the prophets.

- And upon hearing it we shrink back because it doesn't square with our reason, our sensibilities, and frankly, it just sounds a little gross.
    - I mean, think about it for a moment.
    - When was the last time you really paid attention to the words of JESUS we remember at each celebration of the LORD's Supper?
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Martin Copenhaver is the senior pastor of Wellesley Congregational Church in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

- He tells the story of what happened when one member of the congregation he serves spoke the words that maybe many have thought at one time or another.
    - The communion table was draped as always in starched linen and set with silver chalices and plates and a crystal flagon.
    - The congregation was silent, even somber, as the pastor began to carefully read the Words of Institution with solemnity and dignity.
  - And, "On this occasion," he writes, "when I repeated JESUS' familiar words, 'This is MY body, broken for you; this is MY blood' shed for you,' a small girl suddenly said in a loud voice, 'Ew, yuk!'
    - "The congregation looked horrified," he continues, "as if someone had splattered blood all over the altar—which, in effect, is just what the little girl had done with her exclamation."
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For three weeks now, we have looked at this sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John and have connected it to our faith.

- And in particular, to the sacraments and how they nourish our faith.
  - But now, here, in the fourth week, we finally encounter the heart of it all.
- In these verses, we begin to recognize just what is at stake for JESUS,
  - just how much we are worth to HIM.
- In these verses, HE offers to us HIS very own flesh and blood,
  - the flesh which will be stretched upon the cross for our sake,
  - the blood which will flow freely from HIS hands, feet, and side, also for our sake.

For three weeks, we have read, studied, and struggled to understand what JESUS means by speaking of the bread of life and the food of heaven.

- Here, now, in this fourth week, HE makes HIMSELF far too plain.
- In this passage, JESUS gets all too gritty, even base, in HIS imagery to confront us with the claim and promise of the GOD who becomes incarnate,
  - who takes on flesh, becomes just like us, so that we may one day be like GOD.

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You've perhaps heard the expression, "he's the spittin' image of his father," right?

- But that's not what the idiom says.
    - The real phrase is "spit and image."
    - It means to be the inside—the spit—and the outside—the image—of the person they are like.
      - In the LORD's Supper we encounter the spit and image of GOD and have the opportunity to become the spit and image of the GOD made flesh.
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For in JESUS, the WORD made flesh, and in the sacraments, the WORD given physical, visible form once again, we meet the GOD who will be satisfied with nothing less than our whole selves.

- This is why JESUS speaks of giving HIS flesh and blood for, you see, "flesh and blood" is a Hebrew saying that refers to the whole person, heart, mind, spirit, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, concerns—everything.
  - In JESUS, you see, the whole of GOD meets us to love, redeem, and sustain the whole of who we are, good, bad, and ugly.

HE is the GOD who comes for our whole selves.

- In one sense, this sums up all of John's testimony about CHRIST.
  - Throughout the fourth Gospel, we encounter some of the most familiar images describing the relationship between JESUS and those who believe in HIM:
    - JESUS is the shepherd and we are the sheep;
    - JESUS is the vine and we are the branches;
    - JESUS abides in GOD and we abide in HIM.

"In this passage, however," Pastor Copenhaver continues, "language is pressed to the limits to express the indissoluble union and inextricable participation of one life in another.

- "For those who receive JESUS, the whole JESUS, HIS life clings to their bones and courses through their veins.
  - "HE can no more be taken from the believer's life than last Tuesday's breakfast can be plucked from one's body."
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This is the promise that GOD makes to us in the Sacraments: to be one with us and for us forever,

- to stick with us and even *in* us no matter what.

Every time we celebrate the LORD's Supper, GOD comes to us once again to offer us a promise so concrete and solid that we can touch and feel, taste and eat it.

- For here, again, in these common physical elements, we have GOD's promise that GOD not only cares about our births and our deaths, our marriages and our jobs, our successes and our failures,
    - but that GOD has also joined GOD's own self to them and to us through CHRIST, the WORD made flesh and given for us.
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So come to eat and drink this promise.

- Come prepared to encounter the GOD who meets us exactly where we are.
- Come to receive the real food of CHRIST's own body, the real drink of CHRIST's own blood,
  - that we might have support in living in this so very real and difficult world.
- Come, finally, to meet the GOD who offers us, not just meaning, but life itself,
  - life in CHRIST, the incarnational GOD, both now and forever.