

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Feed Your Faith

John 6:60-71

For many of his first followers, it was easier to start with Jesus than to stick with Jesus. This is evident in the opening verse of today's text from John. "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'" (v. 60). What is this "hard teaching"? It has to do with the way that Jesus identifies himself as "the bread of life" (6:35). That's an expression familiar to many of us. But in the setting of today's Scripture passage, the claim was a lot more shocking and controversial.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. He's interpreting a passage of Scripture that the crowd has introduced. They've asked Jesus to give them a sign similar to what Israel experienced in the wilderness when God provided manna. "As it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (6:31). Jesus interprets this verse about the manna, and declares that he himself is manna, the "bread of life" (6:35). Just as the manna from God gave life in the wilderness, so also Jesus gives life.

Now to our ears, that may sound recognizable and reassuring. But to many in the crowd at the synagogue, this claim grew unsettling. Recall that just the day before, Jesus fed 5,000 people out of five loaves (vv. 1-15). So now, though the crowd is initially enthusiastic about the possibility that Jesus could be someone like Moses and provide them with miraculous bread, they're resistant to the idea that Jesus himself is the manna, the bread from heaven. That's what makes this a "hard teaching," difficult, if not impossible, to accept.

And it's not just this particular claim, on this particular occasion, about being the bread of life. It's everything Jesus has been saying about his relationship with God and God's work through him. It's the whole sweep of the story that Jesus is preaching and teaching about himself, from life and ministry to suffering and cross to resurrection and ascension. Jesus' identification of himself with the saving presence of God and the life-giving power of God calls forth a range of responses. Some believe in him, some disbelieve in him. Some follow him, some forsake him. Some receive him, some reject him. Some bow before him, some betray him.

In the section right before the beginning of today's text, Jesus goes so far as to say that "my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him" (6:55-56). Though we may be conditioned to hear those words as a reference to the Lord's Supper, remember that those around Jesus at that time would have had no experience of the Lord's Supper. Maybe there were some in the crowd who understood his words on a literal level and wondered how in the world someone who advocated cannibalism would be allowed to speak from their congregation's pulpit. Who invited this guy to preach?

It's probably better to follow John's narrative logic and hear echoes or allusions to the original manna story in Exodus, where the Israelites initially rejoiced over God's saving

action, but soon began to “grumble” or “complain” against God. In the midst of the wilderness, the people’s excitement turned into a failure to trust God. And so in today’s text, as they stand in the presence of the bread of life himself, we see many starting to display a lack of trust in him. “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life,” says Jesus. “Yet there are some of you who do not believe” (vv. 63b-64a). And John adds, “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (v. 66).

As one commentator has put it, we are given two choices. We can either bail or abide.¹ In John’s Gospel, the language of “abiding” is used frequently as a way of describing the intimate relationship between a believer and Jesus. The term shows up in our Lord’s words that I already cited: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood *remains (abides)* in me, and I in him.” Abiding/remaining with Jesus involves partaking of him and feeding on him, steadily, across time. Otherwise, we can end up treating him as just a wonder-worker, someone who can provide us with a quick fix or a pain-free path to eternity.

But abiding with Jesus is difficult. “This is a hard teaching,” said many of those who were following him. That’s because what our Lord offers isn’t an easy victory but the long road of discipleship. And along the way, our faith needs constant nourishment.

One of the ways we feed our faith is through the Lord’s Supper. As you can see, the Lord’s Table is set for today’s gathering. Of course during and after the pandemic, preparing for the Lord’s Supper has involved less setup. A prepackaged communion set, with both wafer and juice, ready for pickup, awaits you as you enter the sanctuary. Though it’s certainly a safer and more sanitary way to partake, we miss out on some of the communal nature of this meal, as well as the accent on mutual service, that were reflected in our previous practice of passing the trays to one another.

Even so, the main thing is that we’re eating the bread and drinking the cup, as a way of remembering Jesus Christ’s death for our sins and as a way of being in communion with him and with one another. In fact, we sometimes refer to this act of worship as “Communion,” because our eating and drinking deepen our fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ through the work of the Spirit. At the same time, we’re strengthened in our connectedness to each other within the community of believers. The Lord’s Supper is more than just a personal, private act of devotion. It’s a spiritual discipline that Jesus has given to the whole congregation of his disciples, to strengthen our bond and cultivate our unity. There’s a reason that at the close of today’s service, we’ll once again sing, “Blest be the tie that binds / Our hearts in Christian love; / The fellowship of kindred minds / Is like to that above.”

As we observe the Lord’s Supper, Christ is with us, and we’re with Christ, and with one another. True, there are ongoing, centuries-old debates about the nature of Jesus’ presence in the Lord’s Supper. Different Christian denominations have varied, and often conflicting, perspectives on how Christ is present as we eat the bread and drink the cup. But there’s unity around the conviction that the Lord’s Supper is a primary way that Jesus abides with us his followers.

Remember, though, that we’re also required to abide with him. As one person has captured it, “In the [distracted] digital age, it may be the case that the classical debates about the presence of Jesus Christ in the [Lord’s Supper] have been inverted. The question with which we may have to wrestle is not ‘In what way is *the Lord* present in the Supper?’ Instead, the question is ‘In what way are *we* present?’”²

You’re here today. You got yourself up, out, and to your spot in the pews. You’re present. But presence involves more than just your body in your seat in the sanctuary. Presence

also involves your attentiveness, your focus, your availability to the Lord and to the others who are here with you in the Lord's presence. Distractions, devices, worries, plans for the afternoon, and other factors can hinder you from being more fully present to Jesus as we eat the bread and drink the cup. The more deeply you put yourself in our Lord's presence, the more his grace and power can work in you to nourish and strengthen your faith.

There's also the challenge that comes from our familiarity with the Lord's Supper. We've done this before, many, many times. We know how it works. Listen to Scripture here, pray here, eat here, drink here. Nothing new. We know the plan.

One preacher tells about a small-town church that had the same minister for 35 years. He says:

He was loved by the church and the community. After he retired, he was replaced by a young priest. It was his first church; he had a great desire to do well. He had been at the church several weeks when he began to perceive that the people were upset at him. He was troubled.

Eventually he called aside one of the lay leaders of the church and said, "I don't know what's wrong, but I have a feeling that there's something wrong."

The man said, "Well, Father, that's true. I hate to say it, but it's the way you do the Communion service."

"The way I do the Communion service? What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not so much what you do as what you leave out."

"I don't think I leave out anything from the Communion service."

"Oh yes, you do. Just before our previous rector administered the chalice and wine to the people, he'd always go over and touch the radiator. And, then, he would—"

"Touch the radiator? I never heard of that liturgical tradition."

So the younger man called the former rector. He said, "I haven't even been here a month, and I'm in trouble."

"In trouble? Why?"

"Well, it's something to do with touching the radiator. Could that be possible? Did you do that?"

"Oh yes, I did. Always before I administered the chalice to the people, I touched the radiator to discharge the static electricity so I wouldn't shock them."

For over thirty-five years, the untutored people of his congregation had thought that was a part of the holy tradition. I have to tell you that church has now gained the name, "The Church of the Holy Radiator."³

Traditions get started. Routines get formed. Acts of worship become familiar. We start to lose sight of not just what we're doing, but why we're doing it. This can, and does, happen with the Lord's Supper as well. Remember that this meal isn't just a line in the order of worship. It's a gift from Jesus himself. He has taught us and told us to do this. He meets us here in the bread and the cup. Granted, the preaching of the Word is still the central act of our weekly gathering. Jesus comes to us and speaks to us through what comes from the

pulpit. But that doesn't mean that the Lord's Supper is just a formality tacked on at the end of the service. No, Jesus comes to us at the table as well. He feeds our faith, so that we not only start with him but stick with him. We join with Peter in saying, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (v. 68).

Author Eugene Peterson writes,

One of the major tasks of a community of faith is to prevent Christianity from becoming a dull habit. Each weekly act of worship can become a fresh coming to God, prompting a new readiness to listen to his Word, inviting us each into an audacious and unprecedented venture in faith and obedience....

Here is the truth: we cannot live on the leftovers from last month's Lord's Supper or on the interest from last year's deposit of faith. Each time we truly worship, we are asking our Lord to take the materials of our lives and reform them into a new discipleship. Our worship is an act of expectation that prevents our faith from petrifying into self-righteousness or our praise from becoming arthritic from disuse.⁴

In order for your faith to remain vital, it needs to be fed. And Jesus himself is the manna, the bread of life. He doesn't just give you the food. He is the food. Sustained belief, long-term discipleship, requires nourishment, and that nourishment involves strong, intimate, personal relationship with the person of Jesus. So as you come to the Lord's Table today, don't come casually, lightly, or just as a matter of routine. Come not out of habit but out of hunger. Come humbly. Come reflectively and expectantly. Come focused. Come attentive. Come to abide with Jesus, and to have him abide with you, so that your faith can be fed.

¹ Jaime Clark-Soles. Commentary on John 6:56-69. Working Preacher. August 26, 2012. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21-2/commentary-on-john-656-69> (March 1, 2023).

² Gordon Mikoski, "Bringing the Body to the Table." *Theology Today* (October 2010) 24-25.

³ Terry Fullam, "Worship: What We're Doing, and Why." *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 102.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *On Living Well: Brief Reflections on Wisdom for Walking in the Way of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2021) Kindle edition.