

## Jesus on the Menu

Read: John 6:35, 41-51; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

I know you won't believe this but as a kid I was a picky eater. To look at me now you probably think I ought to be a little more selective, not about what I eat but about how much. I remember whining when peas or Brussels sprouts turned up on the dinner table. I remember the sheer terror that ran through my body when mother announced we were having liver for dinner. Ugh! Pass the ketchup and lots of it! The worst nights were when dad finally had heard enough pained bleating from me and with angry firmness would command, "Sit there until you eat every bite!" His anger met my sullen resistance until I'd finally cave in and choke the dastardly gruel down my convulsing throat. We all knew not to spit into the volcano that was my dad's temper if pushed too far.

Poor dad; he didn't recognize my pedigree. Spiritually, I come from a long line of complainers where food is concerned. I've been grafted into the tree of God's chosen people, now part of the Israel of God, and our shared history of griping about food goes all the way back to Exodus.

In Exodus 15:24, the scripture records how the people of Israel complained against Moses because they had nothing to drink. So God brought forth water from a rock. Then they complained that they had nothing to eat. So God gave them manna, bread from heaven, there for free, all they had to do was go pick it up. Never satisfied with what they got, they craved meat instead. "Oh no, not manna again," they whined. They cried, "If only God had slain us by the fleshpots of Egypt; at least we'd have died with a full stomach, our final meal of meat seasoned with leeks, onions, and garlic." We are hungry for meat.

So God said, now getting a little testy himself, "Okay. You want meat. I'll give you meat." So God gave them quail to eat. They blew in on the wind. Thousands and thousands of the little birds fell right in the midst of their campsite. All they had to do was go out of the doors of their tents and grab as many of the little fowl as they wanted. They loved them at first until they ate so many it was as though it was coming out of their nostrils. I remember learning

that at one time lobsters were so plentiful in New England that they fed them to people in prison, every day. What, lobster again? Yuck. The Israelites: “Not another quail. I can’t eat one more!” They complained some more.

Their complaining spread through their souls like a cancer. Soon enough they faced trials and dangers and relentless animosity from other tribes, so they complained about that too. Oh how their ungrateful chorus must have blessed God’s heart, just like ours must when God hears us molly-grubbing about everything in our lives. Most of us have everything we need to get along but still we carp to God about wanting something else or something more. How did we humans become such a race of ingrates?

(If you are reading this online, in the next paragraph I am rendering some Greek words phonetically since my computer did not learn Greek in seminary; my apologies to all you Greek scholars out there.)

If my dad had known a little Greek he might have thundered, “Don’t be such a *gongusos!*” I bet you didn’t know if you are a complainer, you may just be a *gongusos*. Further, when people like you and me and the ancient Israelites complain about our misfortunes and how life is just too hard or risky or scary we may be called *gongustes*. When we want to say that people began to complain about something, the Greek word from the same root is *egongutson*. That’s the word used to describe the actions of the crowd surrounding Jesus when he said, “I am the bread of life,” and, “I am the living bread that has come down out of heaven.” They began to act like a bunch of *gongusoi*.

The definition of the word you can find in the Greek lexicon says this: to speak privately, in a low voice, to mutter, to utter secret and sullen discontent, to express indignation, complaint, to murmur, to grumble. What went on that day when Jesus was teaching them was a classic example of what happens when wooden headed, hard of hearing and hard of heart people try to fathom literally what Jesus is teaching spiritually. Jesus was aware of the grumbling going on all around him, though no individual grumbler said anything loud enough to be called out. Most grumblers lack sufficient courage to come right out and say what they

mean. It's the same with gossipers who will say anything behind your back but smile in your face when you meet them.

I don't remember whether I heard it or read about it, but I do remember hearing of some person or group of persons that rejected Christianity because they thought it condoned cannibalism. When they heard our liturgy instituting Holy Communion which includes Jesus' words, "Take eat; this is my body given for you," and, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood; all of you drink of it," their literalistic heads exploded. The same thing happened that day we read about in John 6. Jesus announces that he is the bread of life, the living bread, the bread that comes down from heaven, and so on and on. Jesus kept pressing their fleshly ability to try to comprehend by the natural capacity of their own intellect up against truth that could only be spiritually apprehended.

Further on from where we left off reading, Jesus got even more outrageous in their ears: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." John 6:53-55

By this time their collective heads were spinning. Even the inner circle of disciples allowed that this teaching was very difficult to listen to. Why was it so difficult? The main reason was that they were listening to spiritual truth through fleshly ears. This happened over and over again throughout Jesus' ministry when he taught about life with him in the Spirit.

Jesus came to earth as a transformer, a change agent, and as one who would penetrate humanity's superficial religion and drive it deep into its intended function within the saving purposes of God. Jesus of Nazareth was born a Jew. He grew up with Jewish parents, attended a Jewish synagogue, and received instruction in the Hebrew Scriptures just like every other kid in town. He was reared steeped in Jewish culture and Jewish traditions. Their stories were his stories.

Of course there was just one crucial distinction between Jesus and every other Jew, child or adult. He was without sin. And being without sin he was the one and only spiritually free, totally free man. He was free to dance deep within the Jewish tradition and the salvation stories of the Jews with absolute abandon. And everything he touched he transformed; everything got deeper and fuller.

Read the first few verses in Genesis: “In the beginning God created...” Now read the opening of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.....” The incarnation of Jesus Christ inaugurated a new Genesis. Jesus brought about a new Exodus too, this time, not just out of Egyptian bondage but out of sins’ bondage. Jesus catapulted Sabbath observance from abstaining from work one day a week to the Sabbath rest extended by the grace of God to all who would believe. The Sabbath rest of Jesus offers us salvation, not by works but by the grace of God given as a free gift. Salvation is no longer something we must strive to earn. Salvation is presented to us by Jesus Christ. Jesus took the ancient Passover meal and transformed it into what we call the Eucharist or Holy Communion. Jesus elevated Pentecost from a mere harvest festival to a celebration of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the member of God’s loving and relational dynamism that would effect a great harvest, this time not of barley or wheat but of human hearts for the Kingdom of God. Jesus transformed the Day of Atonement into a permanent offering for sins, once for all. For a forgiven Christian, every day is the Day of Atonement. Jesus changed the priesthood from an office of servants who offered animal sacrifices, shedding the blood of innocent animals, to the priestly event of the cross, offering up himself as the perfect, good for all time, sacrifice for sins. His body was broken; his blood was shed, all as an offering to take away the sins of the world. All this and many other things were transformed by the presence and power of Jesus Christ.

If you compare the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with the Gospel of John, you might notice that in the synoptic gospels, the institution of the Eucharist, a word which in essence means “to give thanks,” the celebration we usually call Holy Communion, happens during Jesus’ last few hours on earth. We sometimes call it the Last Supper because it was the last time Jesus would

share a meal with his disciples before his arrest in Gethsemane and his trial and execution.

John on the other hand has his version of the institution of The Lord's Supper here in chapter 6. John puts Jesus washing the disciples' feet front and center on his account of Maundy Thursday, emphasizing Jesus servant leadership and method of exercising his Lordship. Scholars have noted this and wondered why.

Some have said that the reason for this is that for John, Jesus entire ministry was Eucharistic. His whole ministry was a form of giving thanks to God. With every act of ministry to bless his own creatures living in his beautiful but fallen creation, with every healing, with every deliverance, with every act of mercy that saw people restored and lifted up, would we be wrong to assume that a deep gratitude welled up in the sacred heart of our kind and loving Savior? I think not.

This wasn't just the gratitude of a man who was nearing the end of a very significant ministry. Jesus gratitude was a golden thread running through his entire work for the Father, from his baptism in the Jordan River all the way to the cross on Golgotha.

So in simple terms, what was the challenge that Jesus laid down in front of the crowd on that day that caused them so much offense and consternation? Jesus was saying in no uncertain terms that to be really, fully, eternally alive, the Jews and every other sort of religious person were going to have to go deeper. Jews were being challenged to see in the humble but powerful and authoritative young man from Nazareth the fulfillment of all their greatest hopes and prophecies. They were in a sense being called to acknowledge that the most important thing for them now was to enter into a committed and loving relationship as students with Jesus Christ. "It is through me you will get what you need and get where you need to go." None of that was easy to accept.

Jesus used the most offensive language he could summon, as though to thrust them away. To get to him and be with him, they would have to leave all

their grumbling and complaining behind. A complainer complains because they think their ideas are better and that they could do better. Complaining is really an insidious form of pride. Complaint encases a kind of arrogance even if it is camouflaged in hypocrisy. Jesus was honest enough to say in the most uncertain of terms, "You can't come to me with that baggage. You will not experience real, vibrant life and still stay in charge. You must relate to me as Lord." You must eat my flesh and drink my blood. You and I must be deeply linked in a new covenant relationship.

And so whenever we gather for Holy Communion that is in essence what we say, over and over. "This is my body which is for you; do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood; all of you drink of it." We believe that spread before us is a feast of love. It is deeply relational at its very core. It is the way Jesus gave us to draw close to him and to in visual terms to tell the gospel story to all who are hungry and thirsty for God.