

Karen Hollis – sermon
John 6:51-58
August 19, 2018

I want to tell you a story of King David during the time he was fighting the Philistines. Among David's loyal fighting men, there were three in particular who were renowned for their bravery and readiness to do whatever the king asked. One day during a lull in the fighting, David longed for a drink of water from the well at Bethlehem, which was under control of the Philistines, who had taken the city. But that didn't stop his three warriors. They went off, broke through the Philistine army, got water from the well and brought it back to David. But David didn't drink it. His shrewd sense of political judgement was even sharper than his thirst.¹ 'God forbid,' he said, 'that I should drink the blood of these men, who went at the risk of their own lives.'² David didn't want to be seen to profit from their readiness to put their lives on the line for him. He poured out the water on the ground.³

¹ NT Wright, John for everyone part 1, p. 85

² 2 Samuel 23:17

One of the best-known Jewish laws forbids anyone to consume blood of any kind. Leviticus 17 affirms that blood is the life of the flesh. Without blood carrying oxygen to the flesh, the flesh can do nothing. Like when you wake up after sleeping on your arm and it feels like a rubber appendage and you have to lay it out next to you to be revived. In the Jewish tradition the only acceptable use for blood, other than sustaining life, is for making sacrifice. "For the life of every creature—its blood is its life; therefore I have said to the people of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off."⁴ The life of a creature is offered to God and God alone. From that context Jesus tells his followers to drink his blood and eat his body that they might receive the life he offers.

It's easy for us to spiritualize the idea of eating, as we've been discussing for the past few weeks. We've talked about Jesus as spiritual

³ NT Wright, p. 85

⁴ Leviticus 17:14

food for the journey, consuming Jesus' love, teachings, the promise of our lives transformed. That is indeed one aspect of receiving Christ, but looking at the original Greek word for eat, adds another layer. The Greek word "fago" implies not just consuming, but chewing or even munching. The word John uses specifically calls for the physical act of eating food. It is an intensely intimate act to bring food into our bodies. We make ourselves vulnerable to the joy and pleasure of tastes and textures, as well as the possibility of illness. We use the nourishment each bite provides to give us energy, renew our cells, lift our spirits, the food becomes a part of us – indeed we are what we eat. And so we consecrate bread to become the body of Christ, that we might receive the life he offers.

Depending on our Christian context, we react more or less to the words flesh and blood. During the year I spent interning at a Roman Catholic parish, we began staff meetings with prayer and devotionals full of references to Jesus' blood, death and time on the cross. With

my United Church of Christ context, I found the words more astonishing than prayerful. But we had wonderful conversations around the table about Jesus, language, and the faith we share. These strong words are supposed to elicit a response from us; they are not passive words, as we have heard. Like my Catholic friends, some of us are so used to these words and receive nourishment from the meaning we give them, that we have forgotten that the author of this gospel was seeking a response from readers. John's gospel was written for insiders, for a little group of believers who are estranged from their Jewish friends and family and under attack by the wider Jewish community for their allegiance to Jesus. They have lived their lives by the Jewish law, know they are not to consume blood, because that offering is for God alone. But Jesus offers them his life-blood. There is no Last Supper in John, but as the little community reads through these verses, they recognize it as Eucharistic teaching and learn the depth and layers of what Jesus offers. The language in this section, whether intended by the original author or tweaked later by editors,

is Eucharistic. Jesus is not encouraging people to lean over and take a bit of him, he is teaching about the sacrament where we meet Jesus at the table.

How do we understand Jesus' presence in the Eucharist? Have you heard the big, churchy word, transubstantiation? It is well known in the Roman Catholic church, where they proclaim the literal presence of Jesus' body and blood in the Eucharist. But transubstantiation is tricky, because when you look at them, the elements still resemble bread and wine; the form is the same, but the essence is changed. The essence of the bread is changed from the baked dough that was made with human hands, to Christ's body. There are many other ways we experience or encounter Jesus in the Eucharist. Jesus taught us to remember him by telling the story; there is a way in which Jesus becomes present with us in the re-telling and re-telling of the story. Many people experience a sacramental encounter in receiving the bread and cup. Another way is in the gathered body, one body in Christ; we come from our homes

and our separate lives to be the gathered body of Christ . . . many experience Jesus uniquely in the gathering, where we remember our oneness in Christ. What other ways do you experience, encounter or remember Jesus in the Eucharist? (pause a minute and think about it – we had a rich variety of answers on Sunday)

Folded into this encounter with Jesus at the table is an element of action. In some churches communion is served in the pews and requires very little on the part of the congregation in terms of a response. But in this church and in many others, in order to receive (unless we have some kind of physical impediment) we are invited to get up from our seats, to come forward with our hands out stretched to receive. Receiving requires an element of agency on our part; it is not passive, receiving is active. It is then translated to our role in the body of Christ.

What was once a loaf of bread is now the body of Christ, shared by all, a physical reminder of

who we are: members of the body of Christ, beloved children of God, one in Christ Jesus. We need this message now more than ever, as we stand with creation, in need of the transformation Christ offers.

Everything on earth is out of balance; there is either too much water or water is so scarce that fires rip through hectare after hectare, calling for a state of emergency. The smoky skies are becoming a fixture of August in BC, as wild fires consume our forests. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.

A mother orca whale consumed many of our hearts in the past 3 weeks as she carried her dead calf day after day. We see ourselves in her and wonder how much of the lives we lead contributed to the loss of her calf. It's been 3 years since a baby survived in the J pod, because there isn't enough food in these waters to sustain them. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer . . . as we stand with creation in need of the transformation Christ offers.

We are one in the body of Christ with all those who have been abused by priests and church leaders in the Catholic church and other churches; people whose stories have been heard and those that have not been heard. We are one in this body of Christ that carries so much sin and pain. We stand as one body, in need of the transformation Christ offers.

I have faith that just as Christ invites us to rise from our seats to come and receive, Christ is leading the way to the continued transformation of our lives and world. Each of us has a role to play in that transformation. We need this constant reminder of our oneness in Christ, challenging the lies of isolation, and affirming the reality of connection and the effect we have on the whole.