

THE BRICK  
**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
 IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK



## MISUNDERSTOOD CONSUMPTION

August 26, 2018, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Good morning, I consider it to be a true honor to be here leading you in worship today. During my internship last year I fell in love with this place, with all of you. It was a gift to be with you amidst times of transition and loss, as well as growth and new opportunities. You all were willing to be vulnerable and honest with me and helped me see what the body of Christ in action actually looks like. When Rev. King approached me in the Spring about the possibility of returning for a second year I could not have been more excited. Even further, we he asked if I'd be interested in preaching, well, I said yes with a heart full of gratitude. Thank you for having me. Would you please pray with me:

*Lord, through you all things came to be. Help us to see your handiwork in all creation and, most deeply, in ourselves. Now Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Cannibalism was just as repulsive in the ancient world as it is today. When Christ says "Eat my flesh, drink my blood" that gut reaction of, "no thanks, I'll pass," was present 2,000 years ago as well. Yet Jesus pushes onward to say that it is precisely through this seemingly bizarre command that we come to abide in him. When we eat and drink of the whole person of Christ, the one who is God in human flesh, then we begin to see that all of creation has the Spirit within it. It is when flesh and Spirit come together that we can see how and where God is at work in the world, how God is moving here on Park and 91st, how God is doing something in each of us.

Three months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the gulf coast, I traveled down to Mississippi with a team of twelve people to help with the clean up efforts. Upon arrival we were housed in a tent city where 80% of the inhabitants were refugees; these individuals had most commonly lost nearly everything they owned, all of their physical possessions. The other 20% of the inhabitants were people like me, individuals who had traveled down to help however they could. One evening I was eating dinner under a large tent that sat on a now vacant plot of land directly across from the Gulf of Mexico. It had rained all day and the tent was more crowded than usual owing largely to a lack of other places for people to go. I was sharing my meal with a man named Tim who I had met earlier in the day when I was at his home. Tim had two daughters and their home was completely flooded during the hurricane. A small group of us had spent numerous hours that day gutting Tim's home, removing plates and cups still filled with water,

taking out bedding, insulation, and wiring. He largely spent the day sitting with his two daughters watching as every physical thing they owned was pulled unceremoniously from their house and thrown into a dumpster. Everything was ruined. Now at dinner, one of Tim's daughters was describing how much she liked the beach and how they had previously come near this exact spot where we were now eating to sit under the sun and enjoy the coast. As she talked the wind began to pick up and a faint howling noise emerged. The weather had been defiant for a few days so I initially gave it no mention. Yet, the wind and the howling continued until they could not be ignored. Suddenly, people started to depart from the tent in a rush and I remember looking to my right and seeing a water spout coming directly towards us from the Gulf. The water spout seemed to reach to heaven and was shrouded in an oppressive darkness. It spun with a great force and you could feel the water emanating from it as it neared. Tim, his daughters, and I all jumped from the table but quickly realized there was nowhere to go. We were in a tent, in an open plot of land, across from a beach, in a now deserted, destroyed, area. So we stood. I remember watching, and feeling, the water spout get closer, unsure what would happen. As it neared the beach, though, it began to thin, and by the time it was within striking distance of our tent it had dissipated. In its place stood the Gulf and some faint rays of the sun poking through the clouds where the water spout had just stood. It was mesmerizing and beautiful and confusing all at once. I won't forget Tim leaning over and saying, "I don't know what's going on here but I think it's more than we know."

"I don't know what's going on here but I think it's more than we know." Could there be a more profound, accurate description of the life of faith? Perhaps if Jesus' disciples had responded like Tim then maybe he would have celebrated, indicating they finally understood. Instead, our scripture reading today finds Jesus speaking and all those around him missing the point.

This missing the point, misunderstanding the words Jesus says, is a common theme throughout the gospel of John. Often Jesus says something and the disciples and other followers simply do not get it. However, we, the readers, are given an inside look and often find the misunderstanding of the disciples to be frustrating and confusing, sometimes even ridiculous. Scholar Paul Duke writes, "In John's gospel, the writer invites the reader to abide with an ascended Christ and to see from that height what a world that loves darkness will not see." So while the disciples think Jesus is talking about cannibalism in our text for today, we know that Jesus is speaking about something higher, not something physical but something spiritual.

To fully see how this happens though we need to back up to the beginning of chapter 6. There we find Jesus performing a physical miracle of food whereby he feeds five thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. Next Jesus transitions to talk about food but now in a spiritual way. He says that he is the "bread from heaven," followed by "whoever comes to me will never be hungry, whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus first provided for the people's physical needs with the five loaves and two fish and now is addressing the deeper

spiritual reality that he is the bread from heaven that will satisfy the spiritual hunger of all people, forever. His disciples though, do not understand, they do not get what Jesus is trying to say, and their confusion carries itself into today's text.

Our text begins, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." The confusion the disciples are experiencing causes them to take Jesus words literally and believe they must physically eat of him. However, we must see Jesus' words in the larger dialogue of the entire chapter whereby we understand he is speaking about a spiritual reality, not a physical one. Just like the bread that Jesus gave to the five thousand a few moments ago which fulfilled their hunger so now Jesus is the new bread which God is giving to those who believe in him to fulfill their need. Rather than eating tangible bread which only satisfies for a time, Jesus says that by eating of his body and drinking of his blood you will be satisfied eternally. Eating and drinking of Jesus' body and blood is a metaphor for the mystery of the incarnation, the mystery that God has been embodied in human flesh. Through fully participating in the flesh of Jesus, through eating his body and drinking his blood, we can abide with him and then, and only then, does our physical flesh come together with the spirit which is received through Christ in the intended way. When we eat and drink of Christ, then we are able to live like Christ.

If this still sounds uncomfortable, confusing, or hard to process, it's ok. We're told that when many of Jesus' disciples heard this they also found it difficult and asked "who can accept it?" It is not an easy thing to do. However, I believe verse 63 gives us insight into how we can confront this challenge. There the author writes "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." "Spirit and life." Biblical scholar Loye Bradley Ashton comments, "The issue at stake is how often we confuse the body as flesh *without* spirit with the body as incarnate, flesh *with* spirit." He says, the author of the gospel of John wants us to consider our misunderstood ways of consumption. Friends, too often we "eat up" the world without appreciating how God has infused creation with the Spirit, thus we use and discard it in materialist ways, we only see the physicalness of everything.

We prioritize savings and our own economic security over concerns of fair wages and opportunities for others.

We leverage the earth for economic gain without breathing in its beauty or grandeur.

We push our children to achieve level after level of status and success, perhaps forgetting that they are already loved and accepted just as they are.

We divide ourselves among physical borders and forget that everyone, regardless of nationality is created in the image of God, everyone is imbued with the spirit, no one is less or more in the eyes of God because of where they were born or who their parents are.

We're called to treat the world around us as incarnational, meaning the physical needs to be intertwined with the spiritual. We're called to keep the flesh together with the spirit and to do so

is hard. It requires us to make mistakes, admit we're wrong, to strive unceasingly, all in an effort to live deeply and connectedly to God, the creation, and all those around us. By inviting us to eat and drink of his whole person, Jesus challenges us to risk becoming whole in both flesh and spirit, just like he was. When we do, then we abide in Christ, in God who became human for our sake, and then the world looks different. Then we accept and live into God's call to become part of the divine life in its eternal fullness, both body and Spirit.

Perhaps a story will help show this fusion of flesh and spirit:

A little while back I was having a conversation with a friend named Margaret. Margaret is now in her early 80s and is a self proclaimed "firecracker." She often speaks about marching for civil rights in the 50s and then for LGBT rights from the 60s onward. She is a fierce, powerful woman. She is also a loyal friend. Ever since I first met Margaret I have known her to be a person who calls, writes, and visits friends daily. I've never before met someone so dedicated to friendship. During the conversation we were having the topic of her friend Dottie came up. She indicated that her and Dottie had been friends for over 50 years and that it was now very difficult to talk with her. Dottie had the beginnings of dementia and had become quite angry in her older age. She had recently divorced her husband of almost 60 years and would now call Margaret to complain about how lonely and upset she was. After listening to Margaret tell me about Dottie I naively responded with a suggestion that I thought would address the situation quite easily. I said, "Margaret, you have so many good friends, why don't you just stop being friends with her?" Almost immediately I could see the look in Margaret's eyes, as if I had misheard everything she had just said, as if I simply did not understand what she was trying to communicate. After a prolonged silence Margaret responded, "Brian, you can't make old friends."

Those words, and the meaning they conveyed, have remained with me ever since. Margaret was not telling me she wanted a new friend, no she was telling me how deeply she loved Dottie and how much her heart broke for her. It was not just a physical inconvenience, a discardable part of her life. No, Dottie was intimately part of her own journey, connected to her in a deep, meaningful, inseparable way. They had not just been friends for 50 years by being near each other, no they had shared life, shared hopes and joys and sorrows and victories together. They had a friendship mixed with the physical and the spiritual. Likewise, Jesus wants us to see beyond the physical, to go past a surface level understanding of "eating and drinking his body and blood," to a deeper, spiritual life that is at its core incarnational, that is connected to God, our world, and each other. Only then will we come to understand, and experience, that everything around us is infused with the Spirit, that indeed we may not know what it is but there is more going on here than we know. It is then that we fully understand ourselves and who we are called to be. It is then that we properly consume and participate in our world, on 91st and Park, and within ourselves. We are flesh and Spirit, united together in a fusion whereby we abide with

Christ and exude his love always. May it be so. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.