

The Mystery of Eating and Drinking Life

Every living thing on this planet depends on food to survive. Have you ever thought about the implications of that? There is nothing that doesn't require an outside source of inputs in order to remain alive. Nothing has life by itself. Everything must eat to live, even plants and microorganisms. Eating is so necessary, that for the majority of species on this planet very little time is spent on anything else. While Coyote's obsession with the Road Runner was about one thing: Lunch! The fair stand works because of one thing: This is a planet of eaters. Every living thing, including our own bodies, will eventually be consumed by something else in the continual cycle of life.

Another way to put it is that *nothing can survive on its own*. Living requires relationships. Sometimes in nature those relationships are symbiotic, where both parties mutually benefit but more often than not, feeding for one life means death for another. We don't like to think of it that way. It's a strange and difficult concept because no matter how well you eat, death is unavoidable. It just doesn't seem ... fair! Everything ultimately fails at eating because everything ultimately dies.

Wow! -Kind of a morbid way to start this morning. But that is the truth of our existence. We must eat to live because on our own, **we have no life in us**. Remember that as something in boldface type: **on our own, we have no life in us**. That is why we must eat. We need to always keep that fact in mind as we confront this challenging and difficult text from the gospel of John. The question put to Jesus was, and still is, a very valid one, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" How are we to understand the graphic language Jesus uses to talk about giving life to the world through the eating and drinking of his body and blood?

Perhaps "how" is the wrong question to ask. It is of course the most natural question for us because we think that if we understand something, then we can control it and master it. We want to solve mysteries, not live in them. But Jesus never answers the "how" question from the crowd. Instead he launches into an extended explanation of "why". We eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus so that we might have LIFE in us! The "how" question remains a mysterious one that does not need to be solved. Mystery takes us beyond what we think we know and into an experience that offers more than we imagined. Jesus commands us to chew on his flesh and drink of his blood so that we might experience LIFE in ways that truly feeds our hunger and satisfies our needs.

This short passage in the gospel of John has traditionally been understood as an extended discourse on the practice of Holy Communion. It is somewhat ironic that the only gospel to omit the account of Jesus sharing a last meal with his disciples before he died, (John has a foot washing instead) provides this extended explanation of "why" we share this meal together. Some interpret these difficult words of Jesus as metaphor, meaning they stand for something else. Yes Jesus said, "*eat my flesh and drink my blood*" but what he really meant was "*believe my words and do what I do*".

But Lutherans, and the majority of Christians, hear these words of Jesus as something more. We eat this bread and drink this cup trusting that we feed on the divine life of Jesus! We chew and swallow bread and wine but in, with and under these **ordinary** elements God enters into our bodies and gives us LIFE – life that more **extra-ordinary** than we ever thought possible.

None of this is magical but it is mysterious. The ancient confession of the church is the “mystery of faith” – *Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again*. That confession reminds us that the Christian faith is more than just accepting some facts about a man who lived a couple thousand years ago. It is about an ongoing relationship with the risen and Living Lord Jesus who comes to us again and again to feed us with the bread of Life. Unlike the every other food we eat, Jesus is called *living bread*, which gives to us the life of God, the *living Father*. The key word in this whole section is **living**. The Father has life in himself. No outside inputs are necessary. God depends on nothing else for life - for God is LIFE ITSELF.

When we come together as a community to share in the meal Jesus offers, we do more than just eat bread and drink wine. We do more than just remember events that happened long ago. We eat **living** bread. We drink the life-force of Jesus which is the divine life of God. The church has long disputed how exactly this happens. Luther called it a “sacramental union” where the real presence of Jesus is joined in-with-and-under the bread and the wine so that in our eating and drinking, we take into ourselves the presence of Jesus. Therefore, God abides in us. Now to me a question more important than, “How does this happen?” is “What does this mean?” What does it mean for God to be incorporated into the very cells of my body and what does it mean when I look at you and understand that in my neighbor the very presence of God is embodied? I tell you, this changes everything!! It changes how we treat one another. It changes how we talk to one another and it gives us the wisdom to not be afraid.

That’s right I said the “wisdom” to not be afraid. We live in a world driven by fear. We fear the economy, we fear terrorists, we fear government, we fear the lack of government. We fear so-called “right wing conspiracies” and “liberal agendas”. We are so afraid as a people that we cannot talk about important issues apart from the fear of “what might happen.”

We fear for our church, we fear for our small towns, we fear for our own families and we fear our own death. Some would say that many of those fears are justified but for those who eat and drink the living bread of Jesus, those who take into themselves the very essence and wisdom of God, **there is no place for fear**. The power of God has come down among us. In a divine mystery, the God of love enters into us and abides in us.. and in that love, there is no fear!

I leave you this morning thinking about what that be like. How would the world be changed if we could only find a way to live without being afraid? How would this week be different if we trusted in the divine presence of God inside of us to give us courage in the face of our fears? How would our relationships with one another change if we stopped feeding off one another and instead lived together for our mutual benefit. That is the possibility God puts before you and me. That is the LIFE God desires to feed us with. So go out today fed with the living bread of God, expecting your life, and the lives of those you touch, to never be the same.