

“Expanding Our Vision”
August 15, 2021
Scripture: John 6:51-63, 66-69

If you follow the Lectionary readings from week to week, you may have noticed that I took some liberties with this week’s gospel reading. I put this week’s and next week’s together because I just couldn’t look at what Jesus says in the first part of the reading without going on to seeing how his words were received. It’s a common device in John’s gospel for Jesus to say something outlandish and his hearers to take it literally. Nicodemus does it when Jesus says we must be born again; the Samaritan woman at the well does it when he promises to give living water so she’ll never thirst again. And here Jesus says, “my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink,” and the people around him think he’s lost it.

Or at least, he’s lost them. We’re told many of his disciples stopped following him. One of my favorite New Testament scholars, John Dominic Crossan, says we often take metaphorically what the gospels intend literally and take literally what they intend metaphorically. It’s clear to me Jesus is speaking metaphorically about his flesh and blood being food and drink. And as Christians in the Reformed tradition we have long since rejected the idea that the bread and wine we use to celebrate communion is somehow transformed into Jesus’ actual body and blood. But this passage does raise the question of what is it that happens when we share communion?

I ask that question because over the years I’ve found there is more going on in this meal than just a static ritual. When we gather at this table, which itself is a metaphor pointing us to a bigger reality; this literal table is a symbol of God’s presence and not its limit. But when we gather here we’re asked to expand our vision as if we were stepping through a portal and entering an alternate universe. In that universe we are connected to God through the life of Christ and invited to enter that life by taking it within ourselves: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” This meal is more than an expression of hospitality; it’s more than mere sustenance for our journey. This meal transforms us, makes us one with Christ, if we can expand our vision beyond what we can see and discern God’s presence within and around us.

By entering that relationship with Christ, by abiding in him, we accept the mantle of his work in the world. When we choose to share in his body and blood, we step onto the path he walks. All through the gospels Jesus is trying to help his followers understand what that really means. As he makes his way closer and closer to the cross, he shows them time and again the true depths of God’s love. But that’s not a message many of them can bear. The disciples who decide to turn away from following Jesus aren’t doomed or especially sinful. They’re afraid, I think. They’re afraid to walk the path Jesus shows them. And with good reason. Jesus offers a path that leads to the world’s suffering.

In his book *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr is careful to make the distinction between God suffering *for* the world and God suffering *with* the world. The Church likes to teach about God suffering for us in Christ, in place of us. But scripture tells the story of God suffering with us in Christ, entering our hardship and sorrow. Not to remove it from us but to teach us how

to enter that suffering too. When we abide in Christ by sharing in his body and blood we move out of ourselves and into the world.

That sounds like a dismal purpose; why would we ever want to experience the world's suffering. But as Peter says, Jesus offers the words of eternal life. If we think of that not as the promise of heaven in some sweet by-and-by but as life that's whole and lasting, then we can start to understand the real joy that comes with abiding in Christ. What we're being offered is life beyond the routine and façade we experience every day. We're being offered a deep connection to the whole creation that prevents our being detached or alienated ever again. In Christ we're shown the way to give up this fragmented, temporary existence that exhausts us and beats us down for life that is whole and lasting, like a flowing river or a nourishing meal.

Making that choice, the choice to stay and be fed on the word of Christ enables us to see the world through new eyes, to expand our vision. We no longer look with indifference at people in need, but recognize ourselves in them and our connection to them. Whether it's thousands in Haiti now struggling in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake or families in Buffalo trying to make ends meet while dealing with food insecurity, their struggle is ours and none of us is alone. Hope for us lies in our ability to see that connection and act on behalf of those in need even at risk to our own comfort and security, suffering with the world alongside Christ.

That's what it means to share in the body and blood of Christ. There is a freedom in this meal we cannot find anywhere else in the world. Here we are free to let go of fear that keeps us hidden and walk the path of compassion, open to the world with all its suffering and all its joy. For his flesh, the flesh he shares with us, is true food; his blood, the blood he shares with us, is true drink. And he gives it all for you and for me, for the life of the world.

Amen