

Eat

John 6:51-58: Pent 13B 2018
St. Andrew's Kelowna

In 2010, the controversial performance artist Marina Abramovic sat for a total of 700 hours in the Museum of Modern Art with an empty chair in front of her. This piece of art invited people to sit and look her in the eye. Simple yet uncomfortably intimate it was a strange self-offering one columnist described as being “simply and persistently there”¹. 1,400 people took a seat, many came back again, one person even proposed marriage! There was something so intimate, so bodily and strikingly persistent about this simple invitation to sit and look her in the eyes.

The gospel we are given this morning is a hard one. It's one that baffled the disciples and the crowd who heard it; it is one that some of the big names like St John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli didn't agree how to interpret; it's one given to us today to chew on. We continue through the bread of life discourse in John's Gospel which we have been hearing for the last few weeks. You'll remember that John's Gospel doesn't have a story about the last supper but instead tells us about feeding people and washing their feet, instead John's Gospel offers us a long teaching-meditation on bread, Jesus and eternal life. Today this meditation culminates in the extraordinary words: “ I am the living bread Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.” (6:53,56). The Greek word is not simply 'eat', but nosily chew or gnaw on. It's shocking and against more than one Jewish law. So what on earth was Jesus saying?

N. T. Wright, the New Testament scholar I heard speak in Oxford, makes the fascinating connection between this passage and a story about King David. In the midst of a battle, King David longs for a drink from a well in his hometown of Bethlehem. Three of his most devoted soldiers hear this and risk their lives breaking through enemy lines to get him a cup of that water. Instead of drinking it, though, King David pours it out on the ground saying, “ God forbid that I should drink the blood of these men who went at the risk of their lives (2 Sam 23:17; 1 Chron 11:19)”. To even mention drinking blood was a very odd thing since Jewish law prohibits its consumption in any way or as part of any food. King David didn't want to be seen to profit from his soldiers' readiness to put their lives on the line for him; drinking that water would have been like drinking their blood. So in light of this passage, Jesus' words grow deeper in meaning. It is Jesus who will “put his own life at risk, indeed he will actually lose it and we will profit from it”. We will receive eternal life because his own divine life is given to us and will become alive in us. “We will have our thirst quenched by his death” says N.T. Wright “and all that that means.”²

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/arts/design/31diva.html>

² *John for Everyone Part 1* p.85-86.

And all that that means. How it means that God almighty makes Godself a gift to us: first in a child, then on the cross, then in the Holy Spirit, then in the outrageously simple things of bread and wine. The scholar Raymond Brown says that what we hear in our Gospel reading this morning is how John talks about the Eucharist, walking a fine line in his day between what Jewish people deemed abhorrent and the pagan practices that attributed magic to certain rituals. This isn't magic nor is it breaking Jewish laws. How else do you describe such intimate availability? How else do you communicate God's longing to make us a part of His life other than with images and words like chewing and ingesting? Since we even struggle to understand that God came to us, as one of us, how much more available can God become than through the everyday food of bread and wine? God longs not just for us to pull up a chair and look Jesus in the eyes- which in and of itself is astounding - but to actually transform us into the likeness of Christ, give himself to us so that the world then transforms into the likeness of love. William Willimon puts it this way saying: "This God is so scandalously, intimately available to us. Who ever knows this, knows how to live forever." And if this is who God is, who then are we?

We do something radical when we gather at the Eucharist. We proclaim that God is scandalously, intimately available to us and that to be human is to be known in this gift and exchange of Divine love and life. To be human is to not just pull up a chair to the Christ's table but to open ourselves to the depth and vulnerability that allows God's own life to become alive in us. To be human is not just to pull up a chair to each other but to offer and to live into that Divine exchange of life and love together, witnessing in all that we do to another way of being and living. The poet and priest George Herbert wrestled with this in his famous poem "Love Bade me Welcome" trying to understand how he could do just that with all the 'dust and sin' his life held. In his poem, Love basically says to him: but who was it that bore it all, knew all the sin and carried it from death to life? 'So you must sit down', says Love, 'and eat my meat'. And Herbert can end the poem in no other way but to say: 'So I did sit and eat'.

May we sit and eat and know and love and be transformed in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

