Grazing on Jesus' Flesh
John 6.51-58
Year B, August 15, FoH

You know how the lectionary seems to skip from chapter to chapter, picking and choosing... skipping over? Well, every verse of John 6 is covered. This is the fourth week we're on this chapter and we have another week to go! Devoting this much time to one chapter, you might expect a different Text for this sermon. But no. This is the one that called me, compelling me to dig; so I dug around, and found some good stuff, some Good News. Rather than putting this Text in conversation with another of the lectionary Texts, I found John, the NT writer, in conversation with the other Gospel writers.

John is not your typical writer. Of course we know that already. As I was mulling over these verses and re-reading other parts of this Gospel, I noted some of the specific distinctions between John's account of the life of Jesus and the other writers' accounts.

John begins his Gospel "in the beginning." In the beginning takes us to the opening words of the Bible, to the time *before* creation. The Gospel of John doesn't begin with the birth of Jesus, or his genealogy. No. For John, the story of Jesus begins before the creation of the world. In Genesis 1, God created by speaking—the Word of God created all things. This Good News according to John is that the Word—the *same* Word that brought creation and life into being—the the *same* Word "became flesh and lives and dwells among us" (1.14)! How amazing is that?! The Word of God became flesh. The Word of God became physical, material, human. And, John also wrote the Book of Revelation, with its Tree of Life and river images. In Revelation, Eden becomes the New Jerusalem. John saw the life of Jesus as a creation-altering event. Jesus alters not only the present and future, but also the past.

Another distinction to note about this writer and this Gospel is that John doesn't record Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Jesus is never tempted to feed the world's hungry by turning stones into bread, or at least the event isn't chosen to include. In contrast, chapter 2 begins with Jesus at the wedding in Cana. His first "sign" after gathering his disciples is attending this celebration and turning water into wine. What a great way to begin ministry! What a contrast to 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness!

John is also the only writer to record Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well when he tells her, "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (4.13-14). This spring is the same spring, the same word found in Genesis 2:6, describing the Garden of Eden, explaining that it didn't rain, but that "a spring would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground." Again we see John's theology, the way that Jesus alters creation, that Jesus offers Eden, in the present....

A final distinction about this Gospel before we look at today's passage. You remember the night of Jesus' trial when Peter denies that he knows Jesus? Three times when asked if he's Jesus' disciple, Peter responds, "I am not." In John, these denials take place around a charcoal fire where Peter is trying to stay warm. After the resurrection, Jesus meets the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. They've caught fish and when they return to shore, they see Jesus waiting for them, standing by a charcoal fire, grilling fish for their breakfast. Yes, a charcoal fire—the the only two times it appears in the Bible. Do you remember what Jesus asks Peter while they're around the charcoal fire? Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" And three times Peter says, "Yes, I love you Lord." In this account, Peter's denial is

redeemed. Jesus gives him the opportunity to make it right. And after each time that Peter answers, "I love you," Jesus says, "Then feed my sheep."

Clearly for John, eating and drinking are central to the story of Jesus, bread and fish, and water and wine are at the heart of the Good News.

In our Passage this week, chapter 6 v 51 Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of *this* bread will live forever and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." And the response from Jesus' fellow Israelites is fighting, serious arguing saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" If ever there was a good question!

Jesus answers them. But we lose the significance of his response in our English translations. Jesus doesn't use the same word for eating he used in vv 51 and 52. Listen to his response with a more precise translation: "Very truly, I tell you, unless you *crunch* the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who *munch* my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life." A bit of difference, yes?! Other synonyms for this verb could be *graze, nibble, gnaw*. Jesus here isn't talking about sitting down at the table and eating a meal. No. he's talking about a constant eating, continual eating. You know, like having a bowl of M & M's on your desk and you mindlessly and repeatedly reach into it, pop some chocolate into your month, crunching to break the candy shell, letting the chocolate roll around your tongue and mouth as it melts. *This* is the kind of eating Jesus is talking about. *This* is the way to eat the Bread of Life. But what *is* the Bread of Life, the Living Bread?

In v 53, Jesus begins to answer this question—this food discourse becoming increasingly more difficult to understand as we move from Jesus' literal, physical feeding of bread and fish, to the metaphorical Bread of Life, to this mystical Bread as Jesus' flesh. We're

right there with the people of Jesus' day. In our *own* time we wonder how it is that we eat Jesus' flesh. We have doctrines that name and explain. We have sacraments that enact and remember. And all that's fine when we're talking about eating. But here, in these five verses, Jesus is talking about *munching* on his flesh, about grazing on his flesh that is true food. Munching on this true food, this unconcealed, revealed food, and drinking this unhidden drink is our access to eternal life. That sounds like Good News? At least the eternal life part.

It is here that the opening verses of John's Gospel give us a clue to this mystery, to this mystical Bread: "And the Word became *flesh* and lives and dwells among us." Jesus, as God's Word en-*fleshed* is talking about his body, and he's talking about God's Word. One and the same. The sub-text of Jesus' words reads: "those who munch God's Word abide in me, and I in them. Just as the *living* Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever grazes on God's Word will live because of me."

This image of eating the Word of God may remind us of Ezekiel who ate God's Word: ch 3 v 3 Ezekiel is speaking: "God said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey." Imagine Ezekiel eating the Scroll! I wonder what kind of wine is paired with parchment?! This is a vivid image! But here is another place that perhaps our modern mind and time in history blind us to this message in the Bible. In the time of Ezekiel, and in the time of Jesus, there were no printed Bibles. Scrolls were handwritten, no mass production, no closed canon. The Word of God was understood to exist *beyond* the words on a scroll, *beyond* spoken words. God's Word existed *in* the world, God's Word lived *in* creation, it included Scripture but wasn't limited.

Jesus' words to graze on his flesh, to munch on God's Word are similar to the Psalmist in ch 1: "Happy are those...[whose] delight is in the Torah of YHWH, and on God's Torah they meditate day and night." This day and night meditation in the ancient languages means a kind of muttering or chanting under the breath, a practicing or rehearsing. God's Word as a constant companion and presence for our consumption. As compelling and pleasing as that bowl of M & M's.

Jesus is offering himself for our consumption. By looking at Jesus' life—listening to his teachings, observing his relationships, perhaps particularly his relationship with God, watching how he responded to empire—by looking at the life of Jesus, we are reading God's Word. But this isn't a passive reading. No. Jesus is inviting us to an active consumption. We're not bystanders being acted upon. We're not standing in a food line waiting to be given food. Jesus is inviting us to be engaged consumers, to be mindful in our eating, to be constant in our consumption, in our crunching of his flesh, of God's Word. We eat wilderness manna to satisfy our hunger one day at a time. But the hunger of our very being, the hunger of our life, the hunger for eternal life, for communion with the Living God can only be nourished and satisfied by the constant eating of God's Word, of crunching on Jesus' flesh. The nourishment and satisfaction from this steady diet is eternal life, a present tense quality of life that isn't bound by beginnings or endings. Those who graze on my flesh and drink my blood *have* eternal life. It's a present tense verb.

Jesus continues to explain the unexplainable, how it is that we have eternal life in the present tense. V 56: "Those who graze on my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." When we constantly consume God's Word, Jesus stays with us, lives with us, pitches

his tent with us. We keep Jesus present with us by constantly and continually eating his flesh, his life, God's Word.

Surely by this point in Jesus' response, many of those arguing with him have walked away, lost in their inability to hear beyond the literal meaning of Jesus' words. Jesus continues, knowing that those who are hungry, will listen until they hear his words, will listen until they hear the Mystery beyond comprehension. Jesus continues, vv 57-58: "Just as the *living* Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever consumes me will live because of me. *This* is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who crunches *this* bread will live forever."

Jesus is the new manna, our daily Portion, our daily Bread. Jesus offers his living, his *life* for our consumption. There are *no* preconditions. There are *no* limits. It is offered to anyone. To everyone. There is more than enough of this Bread to satisfy all of us. Just like the manna in the wilderness, this Bread cannot be stored or hoarded. Our daily gazing at Jesus, our continual grazing on God's Word is our daily Bread. And while in one sense we become what we eat, it is also true that we will never become the Bread. Jesus will always *be* the Bread, living with us. The Living God will *always* be the Source, will *always* be the one Who provides our nourishment, our food for grazing, our satisfaction, our salvation. No matter how much of God's Bread we consume, it will *always* be the Living God who is present and at work.

Jesus is the manna from heaven sent by the Living God. The Word of God is our daily bread, always available, always visible for us to read, in the world, in creation, in creatures, in the Bible. Jesus was *already* our manna in the beginning. Jesus is *already* at the

charcoal fire waiting for us to come to him for our daily bread. Jesus' table is ready. Everywhere. Anywhere. And we are *always* welcome.

Invitation to eating. Honeyed croutons, M & M's, pretzels, sparkling water

So come to this table that has been prepared for you. Come. Eat the manna sent down from heaven. Come. Crunch on the Bread that is Jesus' flesh. Come. Munch on the Word of God.

This isn't our typical communion that remembers Jesus' death, rather this is an eating and celebrating that remembers Jesus' living. It is a time to crunch and munch the Word of God, together, in this community. Typically in communion we get one piece of bread... at this table you're invited to gather Manna and graze at your leisure... munching during the rest of the service...as long as it takes! Come to the Table!