“The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

We’ve come a long way from this moment between Jesus and the crowd of Jews, and how we experience communion today. As many of you know, I spent two weeks this summer attending General Convention in Salt Lake City. During that time, we celebrated the Eucharist every day, and I marveled at how dozens of enormous baskets of bread and as many jugs of wine were blessed and shared with 1000 people in about 7 minutes. Choirs sung out, lovely voices lifting around me in harmonies- let me tell you, church people can sing!- and tears welled up in my eyes each and every day during the liturgy. But, while it was beautiful, it was also clean, orderly, polite and efficient.

There is nothing clean about today’s gospel. “My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.” A far cry from a civilized procession of well-dressed Episcopalians to receive a tidy wafer dunked in wine! I hear the gospel today and I think of the crowd gathered around Jesus and how those words would have sounded to their ears. At this time, the idea of consuming the flesh of a god was not, surprisingly, all that uncommon. The mystery religions of the ancient world invited initiates into elaborate reenactments of the stories of the gods and goddesses- men and women crouched in dark caves, using sounds and stories and secrets to create ecstatic experiences which would ultimately result in union with the divine. Often, this union was achieved through a symbolic meal in which the body of the god was consumed, thereby bringing the life of the deity into one’s very person. Even the Jews, who seem horrified at Jesus’ assertion that they must “eat his body and drink his blood or they will have no life in them” would have at least understood this paradigm enough to know Jesus was not suggesting cannibalism. Jesus is just playing his favorite game- drive the religious authorities crazy by speaking at a level they cannot grasp. The entire Gospel of John is like this- Jesus speaks, and the Pharisees scratch their heads because they cannot, or perhaps will not, shift their understanding to his view of God the Father. I would argue, the Pharisees suffer from one essential weakness- the lens through which they view the world is so limited, so orderly, that the person of Jesus, who is limitless, without boundaries, without differentiation from the presence of God, is just too darn scary.

So let’s simplify things and see if we can make sense of Jesus’ somewhat wacky dietary instructions. All of today’s readings touch on food and drink. To be alive, to inhabit a physical body, requires partaking in both food and drink. Jesus is talking about the stuff of matter- the business of being alive. Jesus spends a great deal of time talking about the Spirit. However, I would argue, so much more of Jesus’ message had to do with being alive *in the world*. The Kingdom of God is at hand, he cries! Seeds, sheep, birds, lilies, loaves, fish, food and drink- this is the content of his ministry. Jesus was a man in the world, awake and alive, Spirit enfleshed and walking around in a landscape that through the mystery of the Trinity, he himself created. He was concerned with the messiness of existence. Matter is not something to be shed and discarded, according to Jesus. Matter is holy- the body is holy; eating and drinking brings life. One of my great spiritual mentors, whom I have even referred to as my spiritual grandfather, the French theologian and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin writes this of matter: *“Never say, ‘Matter is accursed, matter is evil” for there has come one who said, “You will drink poisonous draughts and they shall not harm you,’ and again, ‘Life shall spring forth out of death” and then finally, the words which spell my definitive liberation, “Take, eat, this is my body.”*

So what is the body and the blood which Jesus commands us to consume? Once again, I think he is speaking at multiple levels. Certainly, we know now that before his death, he would invite his friends to a final meal where he would break bread, and ask them to do the same in remembrance of him. And so we have done, for two millennia. He promises that if we do, we will have life inside of us- eternal life at that! Jesus is not pulling some hocus pocus sleight of hand- take this bite of bread and sip of wine and tada- you will live forever! Rather, he is asking us to shift the lens through which we view this symbolic act. He is asking us to pause and remember our communion- *our union with*- everything that is, and with God the Father whose Spirit inhabits everything that is. He is reminding us that the stuff of which we are made, the stuff of creation, matter, is the same stuff which we consume in the bread and the wine, and all of that matter is the “stuff” of God! “Take, eat this is my body”: this is creation itself, brought into existence through an act of the love of God, spirit made manifest. The body of Christ is all things- it is the cosmos itself. When we take the bread and the wine, we simply are pausing to remember that this cosmos, this earth, this man from Nazareth, all of it was given to us, freely given, that we may have life.

This is a messy view of body and blood, of food and drink. This demands a wide lens, one which the Pharisees could not reach. I am reminded of the poet, Hafiz, a Persian Sufi who I recently discovered and like my other Sufi poet-hero, Rumi, approaches God with not just awe and reverence, but a hefty dose of humor. He writes in his poem, “Tired of Speaking Sweetly,”: *“God wants to manhandle us, Lock us inside of a tiny room with Himself And practice His dropkick. The Beloved sometimes wants To do us a great favor: Hold us upside down And shake all the nonsense out.”* I believe this is a little bit like Jesus with the crowds of Pharisees- verbally practicing his dropkick in the hopes of forcing those in his presence to let go of their nonsense and see the world with fresh eyes. This is not entirely dissimilar from my two weeks at General Convention. It’s fair to say there were moments where we all felt a bit manhandled by God! The work of the church is messy work, exhausting work, BUT, it is so important. If there is one great take away I brought with me from General Convention it is that the work of God happens *in the world*- we must not shut our doors and sort out our problems internally at the expense of those who wait just outside. The flesh and blood of Jesus, the food and drink for a hungry world, belongs to all. We are all meant to partake in this communion by virtue of the fact that we exist- we have been made manifest through the will of our Creator who seeks to nourish us. We can only accomplish the work of God by planting our feet firmly in the world. Again, de Chardin writes, “Bathe yourself in the ocean of matter; plunge into where it is the deepest and the most violent; struggle in its currents and drink of its waters. For it cradled you long ago and it is that ocean that will raise you up to God.” I came home from Salt Lake utterly convinced that Jesus is only asking one thing of us: that we, as individuals and as a church, throw open the doors and proclaim to the world, in its violence and in its hunger, “We are here- with food and drink and life eternal. Come, let us share a meal.” Amen.