

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year B

Don't Starve

John 6:51-58

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Chris Repp

"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." 52The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" 53So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

Author's Note: 1) I am persuaded by Raymond Brown's hypothesis, set forth in his Anchor Bible Commentary, The Gospel according to John (see vol. 1, pp. 287-91), that this pericope was originally part of chapter 13, where it was John's version of the institution of the Lord's Supper. Whether or not one accepts that particular hypothesis, I am proceeding on the assumption that this whole chapter six is Eucharistic and connects God's relationship with us as individuals to our relationship to the

community of faith, the church. 2) I am following the lead of another recent Crossings text study writer in employing the grounding, tracking, crossing approach to identifying what the text is saying (Grounding), how its diagnosis connects with our present experience (Tracking), and how its proclamation of the gospel addresses our reality (Crossing.)



God the Holy Spirit creates faith in us that clings to the promises of life they convey. We rely on the promise that God is both the source of meaning and the guarantor of our destiny.

DIAGNOSIS: No Life

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Not Eating

Grounding: This has always been a troubling pericope for me. On

the surface, it seems that Jesus is deliberately (and maybe unnecessarily?) provoking his Judean (Jewish) audience. "Not only do you have to be cannibals, you have to drink blood!" It helps to know that at the likely time of John's composition these were actual accusations made by non-Christian Jews against the Jesus faction. The message seems to be that "what you regard as abominations is actually now God's means of salvation. Jesus is the new Passover lamb through whom is life and apart from whom is death" (see John 1:29ff., John 6:4; 58). "Eating" here is both literal and indicative of being associated with the community centered in Jesus Christ.

Tracking: There are multiple ways to track the resistance of the detractors in this story with our own context. Their attitude manifests itself in antagonistic atheists who scoff at belief in God as delusional, in agnostics and enlightened theists who criticize the Christian conception of God as primitive and barbaric, as well as in practicing Christians who believe in God, follow Jesus, but who regard the institutional church and its practices as extraneous to the true spirit of religion.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Self Reliance

Grounding: Behind the objections of the Judeans/Jews throughout John's Gospel is the implicit counter charge that they are ancestor worshippers and not worshippers of God. They rely on their status as children of Abraham and God's chosen people. (e.g., John 8:33, and also here v. 58) They have forgotten that God meant for their blessed status to be a conduit for God's blessing of others (see Genesis 12:2-3).

Tracking: In our own context, across the spectrum of religious and non-religious people, there is an underlying belief that we make our own meaning and control our own destiny. The religious among us shop for communities of faith that best fit our needs,

or we adopt a do-it-yourself approach that eschews formal religious associations. All of us center the world in ourselves. Those who believe in God tend to see our relationship with God as one-on-one. Christians often regard Jesus as our personal (private) savior.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Drawn away from God

Grounding: Earlier in this chapter (v. 44), Jesus claims that “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” Those who forget the nature of God’s covenant promise of blessing, who presume to hoard the blessing to themselves and cut themselves off from others, actually are being drawn away from God and the life God intends for all people.

Tracking: Atheists have no compunction about acknowledging their separation from God. It defines who they are. Others, who seek a purer experience of meaning or connection with God, may be chagrined to discover that their rejection of the mundane realities of associating with others has cut them off from the reality or divinity we seek, as well as life that really is life.

PROGNOSIS: Life



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Drawn to God

Grounding: The sacrifice of the Passover lamb is what gave life to the people of Israel at the time of the Exodus, drawing away the angel of death and feeding the Israelites for the journey to the promised land. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as the new Passover lamb, his "lifting up" (John 3:14; 8:28), draws all people to himself (John 12:32). This is promised to happen as the story is told from generation to generation (see John 20:30-31).

Crossing: Communities gathered in Jesus' name (meaning those who are drawn and formed by the gospel, as distinct from those who seek to use Jesus in the service of another agenda, e.g., Galatians 1:6-9 or Christian Nationalism), those who are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection and who consume his body and blood in Holy Communion, these communities lift up

Christ anew and mediate his presence in the world.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Reliance on God

Grounding: Christ's lifting up not only draws but connects people to himself. They abide in him. This is the same term used for the connection between the vine and the branches in John 15, also throughout John called faith or belief.

Crossing: So it is in communities of faith gathered around word and sacrament. When those are communicated and administered as the gracious gifts of divine love that they are (a.k.a. gospel), then God the Holy Spirit creates faith in us that clings to the promises of life they convey. We rely on the promise that God is both the source of meaning and the guarantor of our destiny.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Eating

Grounding: Those who abide in Christ are those who eat his body and drink his blood, and those who eat his body and drink his blood abide in Christ. This is the mystery of eucharistic assemblies as both the source and expression of faith. The eucharistic gathering is where heaven meets earth, where God is available to humankind.

Crossing: Our local communities of faith, gathered around word and sacrament, enfleshed in the mundane and ordinary, are, counterintuitively, the place where God chooses to be made manifest. God is of course at work everywhere in the world all the time, as Martin Luther noted. But it is in the gospel of Jesus Christ, made known in word and sacrament, in speech and water, bread and wine, in the presence of our fellow human beings, that God wishes to be found and where life that really is life is to be had.