

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
August 15, 2021- 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Epiphany, 15B  
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

**Proverbs 9: 1-6; Psalm 34; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58**

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

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‘I am the bread of life.’ This passage in John’s Gospel has always been one of my favorites... the basis of so much literature and many beautiful hymns. And John’s words can seem very strange to modern ears, with its difficult language about eating flesh and drinking blood, almost grotesque for some (especially the early reformers). And yet this passage made sense, I am sure, to its 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine audience. For the Christians for whom the author of the Gospel wrote were very familiar with the Jewish and Middle Eastern customs of ancient sacrifice.

As I’ve mentioned in the past, during a ritual sacrifice, rarely was the entire animal burned. Parts of the animal were given to the priests, and parts returned to the worshiper who offered a great feast for themselves and family and friends within the Temple area. It was believed that once the flesh of the animal was offered up to God, God somehow entered it... so those who feasted at the sacrifice believed themselves to be literally ‘god-filled.’

Now the words in this Gospel are obviously not the ‘exact’ words of Jesus, they are a Spirit-inspired reflection that occurred 70-90 years after the feeding of the crowds by the shore... words that reveal something deeper, the significance of Jesus’ sacrifice. Indeed, the terms flesh and blood are used again and again for at least two reasons. First, to remind us of the *Incarnation*—the love of our God, who humbly took on our human nature, who willingly became flesh and blood and dwelt among us. In doing so, our God embraced our human situation, struggling with human problems, battling human temptation, and working out human relationships, all while living in a frail human body. There is an ancient theological view that stresses the Jesus deified our flesh by taking it on himself, further supporting that the Church is the Body of Christ.

The second reason these words flesh and blood are used is to remind us of the *Eucharistic celebration*, of communion. John’s Gospel wants hearers to think of this gathering together and remembrance of Jesus. In ancient/classical thought, flesh gives strength and blood gives life. One of the reasons Jews don’t eat an animal with its blood (per kosher law), is that blood is what conveys life, and so the blood belongs only to God. When Jesus says, ‘eat my flesh and drink my blood’ he is not being literal (as the some have thought), he’s essentially saying, ‘take my life into yours... take on my life, which comes from God.’

Flesh and blood... While on vacation a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity reflect on this passage and about ‘flesh’ and the human body. Up in Maine we saw every variety of body you could imagine. There were many young, athletic men and women running and exercising on the shore... and many not so athletic folks of every age. I also became increasingly aware of my own body, and how in action and

appearance, its not what it was 30 years ago. This COVID pandemic has taught us... Bodies are fragile, no matter how beautiful they may be. Human flesh is vulnerable and has limitations, and still there's a divine quality to the body, because our God took on flesh and blood in order to teach us what it is to be human.

Today's Gospel is reminding us—the Church—that we are Christ's Body. And that together we must eat and drink, and participate in the re-remembering of Christ today. For Christ is present among us, he is re-remembered (brought back) whenever we recall together what Christ has done for us— when we share the bread and wine, the Body and Blood, and as we celebrate the sacrament of Baptism and witness Christ present in this beautiful child. We take on his divinity just as he took on our humanity! Recall the elegant words from Rite I: 'We present unto thee, O Lord, our lives, our souls, our bodies... that we may be filled with thy grace... and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.' That is what happens today in Nina's Baptism and during our Eucharist together!

We are none of us perfect. We all have frail/ weak bodies—whether we are overweight and out of shape, aging, suffering from addictions, or psychological challenges, or from medical illnesses—our bodies hardly seem divine, and yet we are assured by Jesus that they are! And so, we're called to be like Christ, to be willing to be broken, even more broken than we are now... to offer ourselves for the sake of others. And we have no fear, for our faith teaches us, through the message of today's Gospel: *life is stronger than death!*

In a few moments, following her Baptism, Nina will be given a candle to take home. Lit from the Paschal Candle, it's a symbol of the "Light of Christ," the light which darkness can never overcome. A reminder that life is stronger than death. So often, these candles get put away in a drawer or 'remembrance box' and are forgotten. Instead, I encourage Jill and William to place this candle in a prominent place in Nina's room, to be lit again at those times she is most in need of a reminder of God's love. Not only at times of celebration like a birthday or accomplishment, but also when she gets teased or bullied, when she must leave home for his first day of school, or when she questions who she is and whether she is loved. Light that candle at all those times and remind her of what happened here today. Remind her of God's love for her, and God's love for all of us.

God has come to us, in flesh and blood as Jesus, and continues to do so— whenever we celebrate his love together, whenever we partake of his flesh and blood, whenever we take on the life of Christ in our hearts. Whether we are at the communion table, or at table with friends, or picnicking among strangers like yesterday, Christ is present, reassuring us: 'I am the bread of life, I am the source of life' ... 'Dwell in me, as I in you, take on my body and become my eyes, ears, hands and feet in this world! †