TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

August 15, 2021

*“Consumed”* John 6:51-8

 **You and I are modern people who have been Christians for a long time, and so we know what Jesus was talking about in this passage. In fact, we receive Communion every first Sunday—so we actually *do* what Jesus was saying, and yet…the way in which he says these things sound, even to us, a bit more primitive or explicit than we are used to hearing and thinking about Communion, isn’t it?**

 **Try to imagine what this must have sounded like to people who first heard it and who knew this other passage from the Hebrew Bible from Leviticus. It reads like this:**

*No person among you shall eat blood, nor shall any alien who resides among you eat blood. 13And anyone of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.*

*14 For the life of every creature—its blood is its life; therefore I have said to the people of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats of it shall be cut off. Leviticus 17:12-14*

The people who first heard Jesus talk about eating his own flesh and blood knew this passage. Observance of this, and the other Laws, were an important part of their lives.

Can you imagine people being confused by these words? I can! I can imagine them being not only confused, but even…disgusted. Truthfully, doesn’t the particular way in which Jesus expressed himself sound at least a little bit stomach-turning to you? It does to me.

Last week, I lamented that Jesus did not stop himself and offer his listeners a brief sidebar on literary license and metaphor. If he had invited them to remember the manna in the wilderness, they may have had an easier time with what he was saying. Instead, in this week’s lesson, he goes even deeper into visual language as he insists that the way to eternal life is where one must *“eat my flesh and drink my blood”* [v.54].

Instead of helping his listeners have an easier time with what he was saying, translators tell us that Jesus actually switched from one word for eating to another word that literally describes the crunching and munching that is done by an animal. With this choice of word, then, Jesus further reinforces the difficulty of his passage. Not only is he calling his audience to eat flesh and drink blood, he is calling for the consumption of this offensive meal in the manner of a wild animal.

It was, indeed, a hard lesson for the first listeners to hear. How are *we* hearing it?

As I was preparing this sermon, I read the story of a man—a Bible scholar—who was reminded of his childhood growing up in Alaska. He talked about the way in which Jesus’ uses of the word for eating—the one that describes a person as “crunching” or “munching” like an animal. He said it reminded him of the way in which one ate a dried fish.

First of all, to be given a dried fish as a child in the Alaska he grew up in, this was a treat. Second, it was not something you would or could consume daintily. You had to gnaw and suck and tear at it with your teeth in order to get all there was out of it.

He also talked about how the skin of the salmon is used to make articles of clothing—parkas and jackets and boots.

The people who live, hunt, and process fish in this way consume every part of the fish—and it contributes to their life and well-being. One First Nations woman that he remembers, apparently quite an artist in her community, and she makes these articles of clothing, and they are highly prized, but they are not for sale. Rather, she makes them as gifts for loved ones. Apparently, they are not easy to make. Securing the fish is the first challenge. Then, the process is long and very involved, and so to receive such a gift is very special.

To receive such a gift…this woman who makes the salmon skin parkas, and jackets, and boots, dreams of one day making a whole outfit for herself, of being clothed from head to toe in this gift of her own artistry and labor. Yet, what she acknowledges is that first she must receive is the gift from the ocean—the salmon’s skin—the life of the creature. Then, and only then, she may wrap herself one day in this special gift.

She, and her people do not take for granted these gifts from the earth. They use-up every bit of the animals they hunt. They consume every part because every part can make every part of their lives stronger, healthier, better.

So, too, the life of Jesus. His life can make ours whole, but only if we are willing to completely consume the gift he offers, the gift that makes us stronger, healthier, better. His is the life that, when we are clothed in it, when we invite his life and his ways to *consume* our life and our ways of the world.

In our Wednesday evening Bible Study, we are actually reading a book instead of the bible right now. We will get back to that very soon. We are reading a book called *An Altar in the World* by the writer, Barbara Taylor Brown, writes of her faith and her experiences in the faith. Her writing is beautiful, lyrical, even visceral—especially one chapter where she describes being so moved by the story of Christ that she experiences a oneness with him that is deep, even intimate.

A few of us, myself included, found her language a bit “over the top.” The thing is: I think she meant for some of her readers to have that reaction because it is *a reaction!* We did not leave that chapter, or even that page, unchanged—and that is the whole point.

Jesus came into the world to live with us in the flesh. He was not some ethereal disembodied spirit. He was a real human being he walked the earth, kicking up the dust on the path, on feet that needed washing at the end of the day. He ate food, and enjoyed it. Drank wine, and made sure that others got to drink and enjoy really *good* wine. He hugged his mother and other loved ones, and he knew what it was like to care about their lives and his own. He suffered with one seemed to be lost. When Lazarus died Jesus would not even let death separate him from the love he had for him.

In so doing, in loving and living the way he did, Jesus blessed our living. He blessed our bodies and showed us that they are loveable. He blessed all stages of our lives, all of the details of our living.

But there is more: in so blessing us—in all our fleshiness and bloodiness—he asked us to see his flesh and blood, and our own, as precious. He asked us to accept ourselves and the lives we have been given as that which can be consumed by our love for him—which is to say: our love for the world. We are to love him, and to love *like* him.

At this point in the sermon, I could (and often do) relate as example of some great and wonderful person who has given their all to the faith. On this particular morning, I will leave you to supply that example—we all know of them and they are all wonderful.

On this particular morning, I will instead suggest to you that *everything* you do, and *I* do can be done with the kind of all consuming love that Christ talks about in this passage. We can fill even the smallest of deeds we do in our everyday life with love. We can allow the love of Christ to guide our every thought and deed so that our whole lives become one long series of loving acts. Think of what the world would be like if we all did that!

There is a wonderful old hymn called, *They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love*. The refrain is: *and they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love! Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love!*

So, friends, my prayer for us is that this is the way the world will know you and me—by the way we are consumed the love of Christ—his body and his blood, his life in all of its entirety and blessing—and have become a blessing to ourselves, to our families, our communities, and to Christ.

May this be so. Amen.