

**We Are What We Eat: Now With Communion 😊**

**John 6:51-58**

**Sunday, August 3, 2025**

I have to wonder if anyone else is like me and when they read this scripture they go “huh?” What in the world is going on here and what on earth is Jesus talking about? I think this is one of those scriptures where if you just open your Bible and read it, you’re going to be very confused.

I think it might be like the game of telephone. Last year, when I was with my kids at Glen Lake, one of the games each cabin played was a round of telephone, where one person starts by whispering something to the person behind them. Then the same thing happens as you go down the line until you get to the last person, who then had to say out loud what they’ve heard. Without fail, what the last person says out loud is never what the first person whispered to the next person in line. Somewhere down the line, there is a misunderstanding.

When we reread or think about our scripture for today, you can see that there is a misunderstanding that is taking place. The misunderstanding is that some of the people who hear Jesus talking are concerned and confused- they think he is talking about them consuming literal blood, which is against the Jewish dietary laws. Given that Jesus is a renowned Jewish miracle worker and teacher by this point, it is a big concern and a legitimate reason for confusion for them!

And if you’re like me, the first thing you do after going “what in the world is happening here!?” is go back to earlier in the chapter to see if anything that comes before this helps it

make sense. And low and behold, the start of John chapter 6 gives us some clarity about what's happening here why Jesus' audience is confused.

If we go back to the start of the chapter, we find John's version of the feeding of the 5,000. Here, Jesus has provided physical, miraculous bread for over 5,000 people from five loaves and two fish that a boy packed to eat. Enough to eat that all those present were fed, satisfied, and there were even leftovers! These people are so thrilled with what Jesus was saying and doing that Jesus had to make an escape because there were fears that they might try to make him a king.

Then, a few verses later, the crowd finds him again. They don't seem super interested in making him their king again, but they do want him to feed them again. But this time around, Jesus is interested in more than meeting their physical hunger. He begins to talk to some of those near him about spiritual hunger. And here's where the confusion and misunderstandings start, and where our scripture for today picks up.

Those listening to him are still stuck thinking about their physical hunger. Which is understandable, when we have physical needs that need to be met, it can be hard to think about anything beyond that. And Jesus knows this, that's why he's fed them earlier in the chapter. But Jesus is now ready to talk about meeting a need beyond the physical. We know a God who meets our physical needs, and we also have a God who meets our mental, spiritual, and emotional needs. None of what we need is neglected by God.

So, some of those listening to Jesus do what any of us would do when we don't understand what someone is talking about, they ask questions to one another. Maybe they genuinely wanted to understand what Jesus was saying. Maybe they just liked to stir up those

around them. We'll never know for sure. But Jesus does a very Jesus-y thing and doesn't answer their questions with a direct answer.

Instead, he reminds them of the manna God provided in the wilderness. He says that he is like that manna, only better. If it's been awhile since you thought about the people of Israel's escape from Egypt into the desert, manna was the bread-like substance God provided each morning to the people as they wandered the desert after their exodus from Egypt. The manna only lasted for one day, after that it became rotten, so they had to trust in God that it would be there each and every day. It was gift, a given from God to the people, so that they might have life, might survive in the desert.

In our scripture for today, Jesus is comparing himself to the manna. Everything about Jesus, his birth, life, death, and resurrection is also a gift from God, given to us that we might have new life. But unlike manna which will go bad after a single day, the bread of life found in Jesus is abundant life, a life with God that starts the moment we put our faith in Christ and continues for eternity beyond that.

To quote a fellow pastor friend of mine as we talked through what Jesus was saying in this passage, "This bread is not a temporary solution, like the manna in the wilderness. That bread was just to get them through the wilderness. It was nourishment for the moment. Whoever eats this bread, this living bread, who is Jesus, will have eternal life."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus is saying that he is "the loaf who lives." If we go back a few chapters, we find that in John 3:16, Jesus says that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son," that salvation, eternal life, is a gift given to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus is telling those listening to him, telling

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<sup>1</sup> Kaylee Vida, "The Bread That Came Down from Heaven" sermon, August 11, 2024, 8.

us thousands of years later, that seeking to become more like him results in life. We know God gives us abundant life through Jesus, life overflowing. Now, and for all eternity.

If you've ever spent time in a church before, this text probably reminds you of communion, because Jesus here is referencing what he will later institute in communion: the act of eating bread and drinking wine (or grape juice for us) with the expectation of God's presence with us and in remembrance of what Jesus commanded of his followers on his last night of life. But what is communion and why do we participate in this sacrament as a church?

Well, the answer to why we take communion is perhaps the easiest to answer. John Wesley says it best when he says that we participate in communion because it is "a plain command of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Jesus commanded his disciples to participate in this sacrament in the gospels when he said "Do this in remembrance of me." As a matter of fact, that command is what makes communion a sacrament in The United Methodist Church. United Methodists celebrate two sacraments: baptism and communion, because these are the two things that Christ commanded us to do. Our participation in communion is a sign of our obedience to Jesus Christ.

United Methodists also practice what is called "the open table." This means that anyone and everyone who is present is welcome to participate in communion and receive the elements of bread and juice. Those who are baptized, no matter their age or which denomination they were baptized into, are welcome. Those who have not been baptized are also welcome. This is because John Wesley believed that communion could be a converting ordinance. Wesley

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<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, "The Duty of Constant Communion," sermon 101.

recognized that during the practice of communion, someone might feel God move in their lives. They might be convicted of their need for God's forgiveness and mercy, bringing them into relationship with God and new life.

I've seen this at work with my own eyes, and I think John Wesley was right. The act of participation in communion can bring people into an awareness of God, because when we participate in communion we expect to encounter God in some way, we expect or anticipate God's presence. So those who are not baptized or would not consider themselves to be followers of Jesus might feel called to participate in communion and feel God move for the very first time through the eating of the bread and drinking of the juice.

And that leads us to what our mindset should be when we participate in communion. John Wesley was actually very adamant that there is no ideal "condition" to take communion in, because God takes us just as we are. Our mindset should be one of anticipation and expectation.

We expect to encounter the God who created everything, the God who loves each one of us, the God who came to earth and lived a human life to show us what love and mercy and forgiveness looks like lived out. In communion we are reminded that we are not God, that we cannot save ourselves. That we need God and we need each other in order to follow Jesus. Communion is an opportunity to be reminded of what it means to be the Body of Christ.

At one point, Paul writes to a group of Christians in Corinth about this misuse of communion. Instead of making sure everyone was able to participate, everyone brought their own bread and wine and ate it, without sharing with others. Some of them were gorging themselves and even getting drunk, and some of them were going hungry and thirsty.

Paul rebukes the Corinthians, telling them that this is an unworthy way to have communion. This meal wasn't about anticipating and expecting God to move and be present. It wasn't about encountering God surrounded by fellow followers of Jesus. It wasn't about being reminded of the forgiveness of God. It wasn't about being the Body of Christ. It was about serving themselves. The Corinthian Christians were doing the opposite of what Jesus intended when he instituted communion.

One reason we take communion all together is that it is a reminder that each of us is a vital part of the body of Christ. That is one reason why everyone is able to partake in the bread and the juice. When we are all together, we tell each other "This is the body of Christ, broken for you. This is the blood of Christ, shed for you." We say this to people we know are suffering, struggling, imperfect. We say this to people who annoy us, who don't like us. Communion is for everyone: no matter a persons race, gender, age, education, class, immigration status, intellectual ability.

I do want to be clear that United Methodists believe Christ is somehow present with us when we participate in communion, but we absolutely do not believe that we are eating Jesus's body and drinking his blood. We do believe that this is a tangible reminder of God's presence with us, in us. That in communion we are seeking to become more and more like Jesus, from the inside out. Both as individuals and as the gathered church who is called the Body of Christ.

Well, that clears things up! So easy! So easy to understand and oh so easy to live out! While what we've thought about so far has hopefully shed some light on what Jesus was saying in this text, what do we do with this information? What difference does it make?

If we go just a few verses past the scripture for today, we find the disciples saying to Jesus: “this teaching is difficult, who can accept it.” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples are complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you?” It seems that even those closest to Jesus were not quite sure of what to make of Jesus’s words.

I hope that that brings us some comfort. They didn’t fully understand. We don’t fully understand. A big part of our faith is becoming comfortable with mystery. We don’t always know how God works. We don’t fully grasp how God works in each of us, nor how God works through us as a group. We don’t fully understand how God is present in the experience of communion and in the elements of bread and wine or juice that we ingest.

We are not alone as we go about our lives, day in and day out. We have the Holy Spirit working in and through us. We never venture into any space or experience alone. We are also never alone, because we are the body of Christ. We are surrounded by a community of people who are each working on our own and together to show people the love of God that we have experienced for ourselves. When we come together to worship and serve our God, who created all that was, is, and ever will be, who lived a human life in Jesus, and who is in us and working through us today in the presence of the Holy Spirit, we become the body of Christ.

How are we living out the expectation and promise of communion? How are we living out the calling to be the Body of Christ? How are we, as individuals, allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us to be the presence of Christ to those around us? How are we as a congregation allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us to be the presence of Christ to those around us? How are we being like Jesus, being the body of Christ, and seeking out those who are in need of his healing, care, and love?

We, each one of us, and the whole group of us, represent God in this life and on this earth. When we join together, bringing our gifts and talents to be used for God's glory and to show the world God's love, while forgiving each other our failures and faults, we are being the Body of Christ. Barbara Brown Taylor, a well-known Episcopal priest and writer that "Whether you realize it or not, whether you feel it or not, whether you like each other or no, you are the Body of Christ and there is nothing you can do about it but act like it or not. The End."<sup>3</sup>

Benediction taken from the late Tim Brewer, a Uniting Church of Australia minister:

If you have found some of the good bread of Christ here this day, then don't hesitate to share it with others. For this is the bread that increases the more it is given away, and nourishes us best in the presence of goodwill and laughter.

Go on your way in good spirits, for the best is yet to come. *Amen!*

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, "Deep in Chris's Bones", 88.