

Jesus Raises the Ick-Factor!

By the Rev. Salying Wong

[Prop—CA quail, squeeze for sound.]]

Today, I'm thinking about that classic movie, *The Ten Commandments* by Cecil B. DeMille. Particularly, I'm thinking about the scene that illustrated our OT lesson for today, where God sends quails for the Isarelites to eat. In this scene, the wind blows quails into the desert, and Israelites catch them in their hands like baseballs. Close up shots of the Israelites show them, clutching the quails, mad with starvation. Even though we don't see how they eat them, they look so hungry, I am left with the impression that off-screen, they devour the quails like animals, ripping their heads off as they maul the flesh, blood dripping from their mouths. Ick.

This is the fifth and final week of the Bread of Life readings from the Gospel of John, and we've mostly focussed on the bread. This bread has been compared to the descending manna from heaven, the event from Exodus. But, there were other things that were eaten—flesh, like the quails in the desert, like the two fish that came along with the two loaves of bread. At the end of Chapter 6, Jesus raises the ick-factor by telling the crowd that they must move from eating bread to eating his flesh and drinking his blood. This is so gross that not only does it scandalize the crowd, it scandalizes his disciples—it even scandalizes biblical scholars enough that some would say this language was not original to the writer of the Gospel of John, but was added in later.

How did we move from reasonable and decent images of bread and living water to appalling and cannibalistic images of eating his flesh and drinking his blood? As you may recall, after Jesus multiplies the loaves and fish, after everyone is full, the crowd starts debating with Jesus when he claims to be the bread from heaven. He says he is actually better than Moses because those who ate manna died. But those who eat the bread he gives have eternal life. Jesus extends the metaphor by saying that he is the bread of heaven—this bread is different from actual bread. This bread is a relationship with him. A relationship with him is a relationship with the eternal, for he came down from heaven to give life to the world. Relationship with him is abundant sustenance that the world cannot give. Unlike bread and circus, which is of this world, relationship with him is the Kingdom of God (as Lou said in his sermon two weeks ago.) Unsuccessful, for the most part, at convincing the crowd to consume this Bread, Jesus raises the ick-factor: he tells them they must eat his flesh and drink his blood.

It is ickier than you think. Throughout chapter 6 of John, the eating was decent human behavior. Until the end of Chapter 6, the Greek word here for “eat” is for eating a meal. But, now, Jesus changes to another word for “eat”, which has more of an animal quality, meaning something closer to “devour”. For those of you who speak German or Spanish or Italian, you'll know that there's an “eat” for a meal and there's an “eat” for how an animal eats. We have something like

that in English, though it isn't as hard-drawn. We normally say, "I need to feed the dog." But, we say, "I need to eat dinner." The crowd who heard Jesus use this other word for "eat" would have had the image of themselves devouring his flesh and drinking his blood like an animal. Sort of like the image I had of the Israelites devouring the quails.

What do you think about this image? Has Jesus gone too far? Well, the crowd and some of his disciples think so. They exclaimed, "This teaching is preposterous. Who can accept it!" And many turned back to their previous lives and no longer walked with Jesus. They ate bread that Jesus multiplied. They were fine with the bread and circus. But hell if they were going to see the whole world, their whole lives in a different way.

One way I take what Jesus is saying is this: hunger for relationship with me like a starving beast hungers for flesh and blood. Can I get in touch with my spiritual hunger in such a deep way that I sense it as primal desire? Can I yearn for God so powerfully that I shirk off any display of ritual decency and stumble toward Jesus with open need?

So, Episcopalians, what do you think? Shall we dispense with the faire linen, the silver, the knives and forks, and reach for God with hungry hands, and consume all that God has been wanting to give us? Abundance, love, intimacy, life! Come and get it.

Summary: In this final part of a 5-part series on the Bread of Life pericope in Chap 6 of the Gospel of John, Pr. Salying discusses the fullness of the invitation from Jesus to have a relationship with him—not just to eat bread, but eat him with open and primal need.