

Digesting Jesus (Part One)

John 5: 51-58

“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.”

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So 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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This 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.”

For forty-five dollars on Amazon you can be the proud owner of a Jesus toaster. No joke. The heating elements toast the bread through a steel template which etches an image of Jesus’ face on it. Yes, every morning with your eggs and bacon, you too can ingest a couple slices of Jesus. One reviewer said, and I quote, “Got this for my religious mom for Christmas. While she thought the toaster was not as funny as I did, it works well and she eats a piece of Jesus toast for breakfast every day. Praise the Lord!” It is almost as bizarre as what we hear Jesus himself saying: “The bread which I give for the life of the world is my flesh... Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have eternal life... Unless you eat my flesh you will have no life in you.”

As we get started, we know Jesus can’t be literal. He is obviously playing with a metaphor that he has perhaps stretched too far. After all, preachers are known for stretching metaphors too far sometimes. We know Jesus isn’t promoting cannibalism, so what is the metaphor about? What does Jesus embody that we are to take in and consume? Maybe we go back to the beginning of the gospel of John where it says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... And the Word became *flesh* and lived among us.” So maybe the metaphor Jesus is trying to use is that his flesh is God’s word, and it is God’s word is what we are supposed to be digesting into our bodies. But then we have to ask, ‘What is God’s word?’

Alas, we bump into a problem: there are a lot of tastes of Jesus out there for us to try. And we know they aren’t all good for us. There is a buffet of fast food, junk food versions of Jesus in our world. I remember once a street preacher telling me that he could spot demons’ swimming in my eyes, because I refused to believe Gandhi was spending eternity in hell because he didn’t become a Christian. That doesn’t taste like Jesus to me. I remember being in a big well-to-do church where the rock band blew out my eardrums, and I kept hearing that my faith in Jesus could make me wealthy and happy, even heal all my problems if I only had enough faith. But that doesn’t taste like Jesus either. Once overheard a pastor consoling a mother after her daughter died. “It’s all in God’s plan,” he said. I’m still trying to get the bitter taste out of my mouth after that one. A

recent survey asked people who went to church if they were threatened by the reality that by the year 2043 white people will no longer be the majority in our country. 52% of white evangelicals said they were concerned. Almost 40% of white mainliners like us said, “Yes.” Ironically, those who were threatened the least are the religiously unaffiliated at 23%. Since when have Christians been afraid of not being the majority? It just doesn’t taste like Jesus to me.

But there are moments. Moments of substance when something about Jesus gets inside of us, opens us up, transforms us. I heard a story on a podcast called *OnBeing* with Krista Tippet. She was interviewing a young man named Derek Black. Derek is the son of a prominent white nationalist. He is spawned from a long line of white supremacy royalty. In the talk, Derek remembers being spoon fed doctrine about white people being a superior race. He grew up snacking on theories of natural selection and self-preservation. Derek grew up eating the food he was given. Then he went off to college where he became a loner, no one on campus wanted to be associated with him. But then another student who is an Orthodox Jew, named Matthew, noticed how people were allergic to Derek, so Matthew invited him to come to a weekly Shabbat meal he hosted every week for a small group of his Jewish friends. For two years every single week Derek sat with Matthew and his friends sharing stories around the table, eating a Jewish meal together. For two years, Derek was embraced by a group he was taught to despise. He said, “No one has every changed their mind because they were told they are wrong. They change because they are told they belong.” Every now and then, Jesus gets inside of us, opens us up. The Word becoming flesh and it tastes like Jesus.

This week, in the newsletter, you may have seen the campaign card that civil rights volunteers had to sign if they wanted to be a part of the movement. “I HEREBY OFFER MY “PERSON and BODY”—my flesh and blood,” it said. They vowed that they were willing to pray. They vowed that they were willing to meditate on Jesus’ teachings. They vowed that they would walk and talk in the ways of love. That said they would sacrifice their own personal wishes for the sake of justice and reconciliation. They vowed they were willing to refrain from violence with fist and tongue and heart even when they were struck down themselves. And you know what? They did it. They gave their “person and body” for the cause and they stirred the consciousness of an entire nation. Now answer me: Where does such strength and resolve come from? Only from the same creative Word that called forth light and life and love in the beginning. Only from the same creative Word which unfurled the universe’s possibilities and transformed creation in the beginning. The same creative Word becoming alive in the flesh of Christ. The Word becoming alive inside the flesh of civil rights volunteers. The Word becoming alive inside of us.

Yesterday I stood before our presbytery, on behalf of our Presbyterian Inter-racial Dialogue, introducing the recommendation that all 139 churches in our region endorse the Black Lives Matter movement. After my spiel, the Rev. Carlton Eversley, from our sister African-American church, got up to say a few words. The first comment out of his mouth was, “I love Jonathan Gaska...” Everyone chuckled. I was speechless. But then he said, “No, I mean it; and let me tell you why: because he was willing to stand vulnerable before the presbytery on the behalf of black people. God does not force us to be vulnerable, instead God frees us to be vulnerable.” After he shared what it was like to be black in our society, he walked over to me and kissed me right here on the cheek. Carlton kissed me! He became vulnerable, too.

Now I’m certainly no hero. I was simply representing a church who represents Christ. A church who has been vulnerable in the past by standing up for women’s rights and gay rights. A church

who is being vulnerable today by standing up for black lives—and refugee lives, and immigrant lives and any other life that is treated less than human. So what Carlton kissed me right here on my cheek, he was also kissing you.

Vulnerability: It's what an Orthodox Jew hosting a white supremacist for dinner, a body of people marching during the civil rights, and a pastor who represents a little church named Trinity in Winston Salem all have in common. All are offering ourselves vulnerably to the world, just like Jesus does when he offers his flesh on the cross.

“The bread which I give for the life of the world is my flesh,” he says. The Word becoming alive in our flesh for the world to feast on. And you know what? It tastes like Jesus.