

There's a TV commercial that opens with a view of a surgical operating room. The doctor, who is wearing scrubs, a mask, the glasses with the magnification lenses and a headlamp, requests and is given a sponge. He asks about the blood pressure and is told that it is 120 over 80. He then says, "Close him up" and takes down his mask, at which point the startled nurse says, "You're not doctor Stewart." He replies, "No." And as he walks away, he adds, "But I did stay at a Holiday Inn Express last night."

They have other ads with a participant on a tour of a nuclear facility who stops a meltdown, a white guy with amazing rapping skills and a delivery person who provides acupuncture.

While getting a good night's sleep is beneficial in many ways, including for brain health, I'm pretty sure that sleeping in a Holiday Inn Express, or any hotel for that matter, won't *really* make you a doctor or engineer, and won't really make you able to perform surgery, solve a nuclear meltdown or craft really great raps.

In our gospel lesson, tensions continue to rise between Jesus and the crowds.

Things had been going pretty well. After all, he fed the whole crowd—5,000 people, with just five loaves and two fish, everyone had enough, and there were twelve baskets of leftovers. But he took issue with the crowds as they continued to seek him out, accusing them of wanting only their fill of bread. So he went on to explain the sign of the feeding of the five thousand. That's what we've been hearing in these "bread Sundays," two weeks done, two weeks to go, including this one.

At first, his explanation was going ok for the people, but then he said he was the bread of life, come down from heaven. Well, they know him as Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, the neighbor kid who grew up around the corner. “That kid who used to get in trouble all the time?” “No, not that one. The quiet one who seemed like he was always watching you.” OK, so I’m imagining the conversation going a little farther than what John recorded for us... But it is the case that they thought they knew Jesus, and the way Jesus is describing himself doesn’t fit with what they thought they knew.

Jesus response to their complaining is to tell them, “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.”

That’s the verse that ended our reading last week and which begins this week’s. John tells us that upon hearing that Jesus will somehow give *his own flesh* for the life of the world, the Jews disputed among themselves. “Disputed among themselves...” kind of understates what happened. Really, at this point they have moved from complaining to fighting. Another word with the same root means “sword.” I think their fighting was short of a fistfight, but it’s clear that things are ramping up. John wants us to know that feelings are getting hot toward Jesus and among Jesus’ listeners.

Seeing this, Jesus doesn’t act to diffuse the tension and settle the people down. Instead he effectively throws gasoline on the fire.

Up until verse 53 Jesus has been using a very typical word for the verb, “to eat.” It’s so common, in fact, that it’s used 157 times in the New Testament. In verse 54, though, he switches to a new verb. In our reading, it’s still translated “eat.” But it’s a very different word with a much more physical and visceral meaning. You might think of it as “gnaw,” “crunch,” or “masticate.”

It's a word that carried a more vulgar connotation in first century Palestine and it's only used 6 times in all the New Testament. Four times in the verses in our reading today and just two other times.

In Matthew it's used to describe people who were eating themselves insensible. And later in John, Jesus uses it to describe how Judas will eat the bread that will identify him as Jesus' betrayer.

In our final verse in today's passage, "eat" is used twice. The first time, referring to how their ancestor's ate, it's the regular word. The second time, describing the bread offered by Jesus, it's the different word. Jesus is saying, *this* eating is categorically different from *that* eating.

This new kind of eating is raw, powerful and freighted with meaning. It's not regular 3-squares-a-day eating. It's not spiritual or metaphorical eating. It's not a kind of eating that can be ignored, easily dismissed, or quickly forgotten. It's real eating—life-giving, Jesus-giving eating.

Jesus uses language that he knows will shock and offend his listeners. The culture in which they live is one that pays careful attention to what foods are eaten or not eaten, that pays attention to when foods are eaten and that proscribes especially certain foods through the food laws in scripture and particularly in the book of Leviticus. Jesus changes the word he uses for eating, and then he adds language about drinking blood—his blood. Levitical laws particularly forbid observant Jews from drinking the blood of slaughtered animals. That's why there are specific guidelines for preparing kosher meats.

In next week's reading we'll hear the consequences of Jesus inflammatory language. It's very appropriate to ask why Jesus is so challenging his listeners? I don't think Dale Carnegie would lift up this particular approach in his book on winning friends and influencing people.

But he wants them to know what is happening right there in front of them is *real*.

God has *really* come into the world in Jesus, as promised in the first chapter of John, “...the Word became flesh and lived among us. And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” The word, Jesus, became flesh and made his life here with us, moved in with us, literally, pitched his tent... right in our back yard.

Jesus *really* lived and taught and healed and walked with the people.

Jesus *really* experienced the bitterness of betrayal, denial and abandonment. Jesus felt the *real* violence and death of the cross.

Jesus was and is the *real* promise of God in the world, fully, completely, entirely.

And Jesus is telling his listeners, as John tells his community and we hear today, that Jesus is real for us in the meal that we share, the bread and wine, which are his body and blood for us.

There is no Last Supper in John’s gospel. Well, there is a meal that they eat together before Jesus is arrested, but in John’s gospel, the defining act of that meal is Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. There’s no lifting of the bread and wine. There’s no declaration that those elements are his body and bread given for them, and for us. That doesn’t happen.

Instead what we have is this Bread of Life discourse, Jesus’ explanation of the sign of the feeding of the 5,000, where he calls his listeners to real eating and real drinking of his body and blood. This is sacramental language—the invisible promise of God made visible, tangible, visceral and real through the eating of bread and wine in which Jesus has promised to be present.

As we eat the meal together, we participate in God’s life-giving promise. Taking it in, consuming it, and being nourished and strengthened by it. It’s been a blessing these past weeks to have a different bread each week and to receive a substantial portion. That’s a reminder that

what we are given in the meal by God, Jesus with us, is substantial and abundant. Filling and sustaining.

It's all too easy and sometimes pretty tempting to spiritualize our faith.

A spiritualized faith experiences God at a distance. God up in the clouds or away over there. God separate from the messiness of this world and the physical reality of our broken and sometimes battered lives. It's the same temptation that wants to separate out what is the bodily experience of our physical life from a so-called spiritual, cleaner experience of our "souls." It's a faith that says I'm spiritual and not religious, because then we can separate ourselves from the messy reality of trying and sometimes failing to be God's people together—in community.

It's easier to see God in beautiful sunsets, in the mountains or the ocean, in a touching story of kindness or generosity from Upworthy that we share in our Facebook feed.

It's easier to act as a spectator in this faith business, sitting in our pews when it fits our schedule, watching what's happening, maybe providing commentary to our neighbor. Imagining that the tough bits are about someone else, that they have to do with another person's life.

But that's not a faith that has anything to do with the in-your-face, throwing gasoline on the fire, physical, visceral, really-with-us, pitched his tent in our backyard, Jesus.

The point Jesus is making to his listeners, and to us, is that God's promise made real in Jesus is a promise that meets us...

In the world in which we really live, not in the world in which we wished we live, hoped we live or pretend to live.

That meets us in our everyday lives, in our selfishness, in our weakness, in our irritating habits and annoying routines, in those occasions when we hurt or are hurt.

That meets us in the messy bits maybe even more than in the pretty bits.

That meets us in the physicality of our bodies. Our sometimes broken-down, sometimes out-of-shape, sometimes physically taxed, gift-of God, bodies.

There's no knowing Jesus without visceral, physical, total engagement.

The faith of God in Jesus is a faith in which we participate. It's Jesus who wants all of us, and who wants us to have all of him.

It's a faith that brings us forward to the rail, to receive what today will be a chewy, crunchy bread which will require us to gnaw and chew. To receive a tangy, grapey wine, not long from the warm rows of vines that produced it.

It's a faith that calls us to seek God, in our prayers, through the word in scripture, through worship with these other sometimes broken and battered and maybe sometimes irritating and annoying people, led by a broken, battered and surely sometimes irritating and annoying pastor.

It's a faith that calls us to share from what we have—our stuff, our time, the gifts with which we have been blessed.

It's a faith that calls us to be God's love in Jesus out there in the world, trusting that God will take our feeble efforts and by the power of the Spirit cause them to bear fruit.

It's a real faith, in God made real in the flesh in Jesus.

Thank God that we can gather each week and together share in the meal, eating Jesus.