

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
Pentecost 12, Proper 15
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John 6:51-58

Jesus said, “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.”

Cowboys and Piranhas

“It’s like cowboys and piranhas! The Lord’s Supper is a lot like cowboys and piranhas!”

That was the Communion Meditation I heard a long time ago. It was the absolute worst reflection on the Eucharist that I had ever heard. In fact, I think that it’s a big reason why I’m Episcopalian today. While I was raised as an Episcopalian Christian, in college I went to a wonderful church from a different tradition and I think the moment that I realized that I truly am Episcopalian was the time when I heard this communion reflection about cowboys and piranhas. It was so bad that naturally I want to share it with you today. The story went like this:

In Argentina there are cowboys who raise livestock and live a nomadic lifestyle. These *gauchos*, as they are called, ride horses and drive cattle across *Las Pampas*, these vast grasslands of Argentina and Uruguay.

On occasion, the herd of cattle must cross a river which is particularly treacherous in that part of the world because the freshwater rivers and lakes of Argentina are known to be habitat for the small, pink, sharp-toothed, flesh-eating fish of horror movie fame called piranhas. Now, you all know that piranhas are attracted to blood and I’m sure you also know that they can smell a single drop of blood in 200 liters of water. It is also said that piranhas are especially attracted to

splashing in water which makes fording a river with a herd of cattle particularly risky. So, the cowboys came up with a solution to get the herd, *at least most of it*, across the piranha, caiman infested river safely. It wasn't an easy thing to do, you see. It required sacrifice.

The cowboys would take the cattle to the best place to cross and get them ready to be driven across the river. At the same time, they would take one head of cattle by itself downstream -- and it is very important that it's downstream -- and after wounding it, they got this cow to go into the water. And, well, I think we all know what happens next. That cow draws every piranha from the area. It does not go well for that cow but the herd is able because of this sacrificial animal, to cross the river safely. Don't you know that God's love for you is a lot like cowboys and piranhas?

Now, there are two things that must be said before I continue in this cultural and theological adventure that we are all on this morning. The first is that I have absolutely no idea if there is any truth to this story. I have no idea if Gauchos actually cross rivers this way. Like many good Americans on social media these days, I'm just sharing with you something that I heard. Maybe it's true, maybe it's not. I would not recommend quoting your priest as an expert in Argentine agricultural practices or the nomadic lifestyles of Gauchos.

The second thing I must say at this point is that if you struggle to connect this story to the love of God or if you are unable to find your experience of Communion enriched by this narrative about cowboys and piranhas (if it doesn't really do much for you) then -- and there's no easy way for me to say this -- like me, you may be Episcopalian, also.

Pardon the double negative, but it's not that Christ hasn't been sacrificed for us in some way. Of course, we teach often about sacrificial love and the way of the cross being the way of life and peace. But when I read John chapter 6, which we are reading again this Sunday, I hear about the *bread of life*. I hear about the living bread that came down from heaven to give life to the world.

Now let's be honest that this teaching is not easy. We have here Jesus saying things like, "Whoever eats this bread will live forever.... The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." He says, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.... For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." He says, "...whoever eats me will live because of me." It's no wonder that people were offended by this. It's no wonder that they argued with him and said, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

In fact, we have evidence from Justin Martyr and Tertullian of Carthage who lived about 150 to 200 years after Christ, that one of the conspiracy theories about Christians being shared on Facebook back then -- one of the things whispered at bars and in backyards -- was that Christians were cannibalistic. People heard that they eat the body of this Christ and they drink his blood.

And in John chapter 6, we must remember that this is before the Last Supper when Jesus gathered with his disciples in the upper room. This is before the footwashing, before the bread and cup, before the cross and resurrection.

It was a hard teaching for ancient people to understand and it is a hard teaching for people to understand today. Even Christians -- many Christians -- have rejected Jesus' words at face value or they have done gymnastics to interpret them in some less offensive way. At a lot of churches, people gather for Communion and they simply recall the sacrifice of the cross while they individually serve themselves communion. It's a time for sad music and guilt. For a lot of Christians, it's just about cowboys and piranhas.

But in the Episcopal tradition, we find something very different happening. We find on our altar, after that Great Amen, the living bread which came down from heaven. It's just bread and wine, folks, but it's not just bread and wine. It has changed on that altar into something sacramental, something mysterious, and we are changed in taking it in. Jesus talks about and teaches about the bread of life and our need to be filled. He breaks bread and shares wine with his disciples at the Last Supper saying, "This is my body. This is my blood." He gives his life for us on the cross and overcomes death and the grave. All of that is wrapped up—indeed, Jesus himself is really present today—in our Eucharistic feast. Our hunger and thirst can be satisfied here, not by a symbolic wafer but by actual food, indeed, the bread of life.¹

It's very incarnational, too. First, God takes on flesh and bones in Jesus. Then, Jesus takes on bread and wine in the Eucharist. At the eternal and material core of Christianity we find body and blood, bread and wine, poured out freely and shared by all.² And that transforms us even when all we can do is kneel at an altar and put out our hands. This is deep sustenance; this is Jesus himself. Jesus proclaims against all reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including our own failures, are being made new.³ He will fill us and we can share him with a hungry world. What do you offer to someone who just found out they have cancer? What do you say to kids who would rather be playing video games or staring at a cell phone? What do you bring to a friend stressed about paying for their kids' college and their own retirement and wanting to find time to rest? What do you say to someone who is behind bars? The same thing we hear today, "This is the bread of life. This is the cup of salvation."

This is why the ministry of our Lay Eucharistic Visitors is so important. These are people like you who are sent out after Communion to share it in love. Our folks -- members of the Body of Christ here at St. John -- are not able to come to this altar so we bring it to them. We don't bring them common food or common drink, we bring them Christ who makes us living members of

¹ Sara Miles, *Take this Bread* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2008), xi.

² Sara Miles, *Take this Bread*, xiii.

³ *Ibid.*, xv.

himself and one another. Did you know that we need more Lay Eucharistic Visitors? We need more people to go out -- even just once a month -- with holy food and holy drink.

I cannot explain to you *how* the bread and wine becomes the body and blood of Christ but I can say to you *that it does become* Christ's body and blood. It ain't just cowboys and piranhas here today. It isn't the bread your ancestors ate in the desert. This bread and wine becomes food for our souls, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, a celebration of Easter's triumphs. It becomes divine nutrition and if you eat it, if you take Christ in, you will have life within you, you will have life eternal, and Christ will raise you up on the last day.