

## A Storytelling Commentary on John 6:51-58

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This section of the bread discourse begins with an incredibly provocative question and answer. It is a puzzle that introduces one of the most provocative set of statements in the whole of the biblical tradition. Jesus' words explaining his answer to the question "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" are highly concrete. He does not make these words symbolic: "eat my flesh and drink my blood." The question that underlies the puzzle of this discourse and of this particular section, which is what does "the bread" actually *mean*?

Generally these statements are taken as doctrinal descriptions of what has become the doctrine of transubstantiation. In other words, as a way of trying to interpret what Jesus means here, the church in the medieval period concluded that in the Eucharist the bread and wine became Jesus' body and blood in their actual substance. The literalism of these statements became the basis for a philosophical description that was itself even more realistic and literal in its interpretation of these words. But the thing that becomes clear in the telling of the story is that this is not so much about *substance* as it is about *relationship*.

The bread discourse has what is in effect a kind of long decrescendo. It's a long speech that gets softer and softer and more and more intimate. This is the climax of the movement of relationship between the listeners and Jesus. Jesus is describing the intimacy of relationship that exists between him and those who believe in him and eat the bread that he provides. The understanding of the bread that was given at the feeding of the 5000 is then made very explicit in terms of relationship. The relationship is a relationship of intimacy and in that intimacy people will find spiritual life. They will find eternal life by being part of this intimate relationship with Jesus and with God. The words are not pronouncements so much as they are descriptions of intimacy.

One of the key words in the middle of this story is the word "abide." We encounter it in Jesus' statement, "Whoever eats my flesh will *abide* in me." In Greek, this word, *meno*, means "to remain, to stay." It means to be in an ongoing intimate relationship of love and trust: you and me, I in them. It is an intimacy of contact and of togetherness, of literally being one body by being joined through eating flesh and drinking blood. That's the metaphor: oneness. And whoever eats this bread, whoever enters into this relationship, this relationship of spiritual identity, will live forever in that spirit, that spirit of love.

So what matters in the telling of the story is to communicate that intimacy, that love. The climax of this discourse is Jesus saying that what he will give for the life of the world is his flesh. This is a passion prophecy that he will die for the life of the world. He will literally give himself for the sake of the world, for the sake of those who are in the world, those who are in relationship with him, those whom he loves. This climactic part of the

discourse is an appeal from Jesus to his listeners to enter into that intimacy of relationship and to remain, to stay, to abide in that intimacy of connection.

Why would John use such radically concrete language here that is so offensive? One of the reasons may be that John is trying to break through the sense of alienation, separation, and distance from God that was present in his culture. These words are about God in Jesus being intimately present with everyone who believes—not distant, but close. This is also true of religious experience in worship, the scriptures, and being part of a faith community. Many religious communities are emotionally distant. They are not intimate or close. This discourse ends with an invitation to a closeness of relationship that is radically different than what was the norm in the ancient world and today.