



John 6:51-58

6:51 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."

6:52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

6:53 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.

6:54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day,

6:55 for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

6:56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.

6:57 Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

6:58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which the ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."



Sermon: *Lifeforce*

We've now spent five Sundays in the "bread discourses of John," and all of this talk of carbohydrates culminates in two verses:

51: I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

56: Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

If you have been paying close attention these last five weeks, yes, we have been talking about *bread* the whole time. But we haven't been talking about the same *kind* of bread the whole time. Jesus has been explaining a process. We've moved from Jesus talking about the *bread of heaven* to *living bread* to *flesh and blood*.

At the beginning of this discourse, we meet Jesus, way out in the wilderness with a whole multitude of people. And what does Jesus do? He offers both physical and spiritual manna. Jesus, he, himself, personally multiplies and distributes bread. And Jesus, he, himself, personally teaches and preaches. So...there's a connection between God's provisions in the past and God's provisions in the present. Just as the ancient Israelites received bread and law in the wilderness, these more modern Israelites are receiving bread and instruction in their present wilderness. This is the bread of heaven, a credentialing bread, signaling to every wilderness wanderer that Jesus represents the divine and prophetic tradition of YHWH.



Jesus, however, is quick to remind his listeners, both then and now, that even this miracle bread has a shelf life. It'll feed you for a day. And this word or instruction, well, it'll only go so far if it's rooted in lifeless, predictable, rote application. The bread of heaven captures our attention. It's an entry point to belief, but that belief has got to be coupled with a lived faith experience.

Therefore, Jesus says, "Let me invite you into a more meaningful bread, and a more meaningful word: The living bread. This is the very source of God's presence. And guess what? I am that living bread. When you are in my company, when you come to feast at my table, you are living the God experience. You are connecting with the very source of God."

Stay with me. Jesus offers the bread of heaven in the wilderness. And we, his disciples, are aware of his special quality, intrigued even. Jesus then offers us living bread, his presence, and it offers more than subsistence. It offers fulfillment.

Finally, today, we get the third movement. Jesus says, "Come partake in my own flesh and blood. Abide in me, and I'll abide in you." And no, this isn't an invitation to cannibalism. This is metaphorical language, just like when Jesus invited Nicodemus into new birth, and invited the Samaritan Woman to drink living water. Jesus isn't inviting us to cut him into a thousand bite-sized portions. Jesus is inviting us to feast in relationship with him.

Somehow, somehow, Jesus SO fulfilled his purpose, SO channeled the divine, SO connected to the God-Stuff, that God experienced humanity and humanity experienced God. Jesus, the word made flesh, revealed the very same substance that has been present even before the existence of the cosmos. And when we choose to be in relationship with

Lifeforce
Bob Stillerman
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
John 6:51-58



Jesus, we are ultimately in relationship with God. Because we know a little something of the life of Jesus, we also know a little something of God.

Think of it this way. I know each of you in this room in some way. I've been blessed to know a little something of your experience, to receive some of your spirit, to see your character in multi-dimensional ways. Each of you here is part of an extended village – you have children, siblings, parents, relatives, many of whom I've never met. But I can say with certainty, because I have known you, because we have shared something together, I know a little something of them as well.

As a community, Millbrook, we seek the bread of heaven – the consistent provision, love, and guidance of our Creator. We join in that ongoing history. As individuals, we are invited to experience the living bread, the presence of Jesus, that thing that connects his story to ours. And as a community, we are invited into the body or flesh of Jesus. The love, the energy, the service, the neighboring that Jesus does in life, right here in three dimensions, living, breathing, sensing...we are invited to feast on this same way of living.

We have talked about bread, and feasting, and the presence of Jesus, and the gathered community. Nowhere, in this chapter will you find a specific reference to Communion or Eucharist. Actually, you won't find any reference to table words in John's gospel. Just foot-washing after a Passover meal. But that's not gonna stop me from talking about table this morning. So...consider this a shift in the sermon. We've talked about bread. Now we are gonna talk for a moment about how we serve bread at Millbrook. Begin shift!

Lifeforce
Bob Stillerman
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
John 6:51-58



For eight years, I had the distinct pleasure and honor to present the elements of communion for the congregation of Sardis Baptist Church, and I did so each time with my friend and colleague Jonathan Eidson. We had an established routine. I would introduce the bread. And Jonathan would introduce the cup. And together, in collaborative partnership, we would extend an invitation to the feast.

You know how the first part goes. During the meal, Jesus takes the bread, he gives thanks for it, and he breaks it, and he says, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

But the second part is a little different. Jonathan would say, “In the same way after supper, Jesus took the cup, and he said, ‘This is my *lifeforce* poured out for you; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

And the closing line: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

The formulation of this regular liturgy is taken from Paul’s first letter to the Church at Corinth. And if you were paying attention, you’ll note that Jonathan substitutes the word *lifeforce* for blood. And if you have really been paying attention, you may also note that I have copied Jonathan’s gesture in presenting the elements at in my time here at Millbrook.

Our word choice, and really the language of invitation that bookends our formal table liturgy each Communion Sunday, is rooted in this sixth chapter of John.

Scholar Gail O’Day hypothesizes, and I agree, that while the Johannine Community doesn’t offer formal or institutionalized instructions for



Eucharist, they undoubtedly participated in Eucharistic meals. O'Day argues, and again I concur, that this sixth chapter of John is the instruction.

Jesus, personally invites and distributes bread to the masses. Jesus engages in personal conversations throughout this gospel inviting new disciples into his presence. And Jesus, again, personally, invites new initiates into a feast of life. "Live wholly and fully as I live;" he says, "Feast in the divine way."

Finally, O'Day notes what I believe is the best distinction of the Johannine community. This community doesn't solely incorporate the feast with the cross. Yes, 100%, the death of Jesus is important, and he is giving his whole self to God's redemptive purposes. But in mentioning the Exodus, in highlighting the ministry and teachings of Jesus, in building community, the entire chapter invites us to a table of the entire Jesus story.

Here's the other thing. The other communities, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and Paul's as well, offer formal instructions on what to say about the elements, when to say it, and who should say it, and to whom it should be said. An intercessor offers the invitation. And in all of these communities, there's not a whole lot of emphasis on the living, serving, and loving of Jesus. Nor is there significant expression on how our feasting should affect the tables beyond our sanctuary walls.

So here at Millbrook, we honor the formality of the synoptic gospels – the words of institution become remembrance. But we do use the slight adaptation of lifeforce to emphasize a little something of John. We remember that Jesus gave of everything that animated his Spirit – not just the strength of his body, not just the oxygen of his blood, not just



his freedom and autonomy, but his heart and his soul and his mind. Jesus didn't just give the end of his life; he gave the very fabric, the very entirety of his life. For me, lifeforce expresses the depth of the feast we are invited to in John's gospel.

Finally, we offer an open invitation to our table, no matter where a person finds themselves in their faith journey. And we remind everyone that the invitation isn't ours to give, because it's God's Table, not ours. That's also a direct linkage to John. Jesus offers a personal and direct invitation to every disciple. But it's really important to note that the invitation and its reception take varied forms. Just read John's gospel, and you'll find that no two feasts are the same; no two conversions are the same; no two Jesus connections are the same.

So...Jesus invites us to partake in his body, and his lifeforce, and to feast, right where we are, just as we are.

Let me close with a final thought. Where might we draw inspiration for what it looks like to feast in the way Jesus invites us to? I think our psalm today, Psalm 111, is a great place to start:

¹ Praise the Lord!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

² Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.

³ Full of honor and majesty is God's work,
and God's righteousness endures forever.

⁴ God has gained renown by God's wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.

⁵ God provides food for those who fear God;



God is ever mindful of God's covenant.

⁶ God has shown God's people the power of God's works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

⁷ The works of God's hands are faithful and just;
all God's precepts are trustworthy.

⁸ They are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹ God sent redemption to God's people;
God has commanded God's covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is God's name.

¹⁰ The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it^[a] have a good understanding.
God's praise endures forever.

I don't know about y'all, but I want to feast with mystery-writer Number One-Eleven. That's right, I'll clear my calendar – tea, coffee, lunch, even a quick Zoom – I'll do whatever it takes to banquet with our psalmist. I love the content of our author's psalm. But even better, I love the enthusiasm they have for their Creator, and all the created beings who stand in community with them.

The Psalmist loves God, and the psalmist loves to be in the company of people who, just like them, love hearing God's story, too!

For our psalmist, God's truth is authentic; God's work is both impactful and inescapable; God's character is good, and decent, and righteous.

The psalmist tells us that God does wonderful deeds: God creates. God provides. God protects. God tamed the chaos monster, rained manna in the wilderness, and removed a nation from captivity.

Lifeforce
Bob Stillerman
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
John 6:51-58



God is faithful and consistent in every generation. God is collaborative, bound in the covenant of Creator, people, and land. God offers a restorative justice steeped in jubilee. And yet this God who is powerful enough to create the universe and flummox Pharoah is somehow SO humble. This God is accessible, interested in every created being, and eager to give license and voice to their varied gifts. And best of all, we are invited, personally, to experience this God in Jesus, the bread of life.

Good friends, may we pour out our lifeforce in the pursuit of such a feast. And may we praise our Creator, all of us, with our whole hearts.

Amen.