

**August 18-19, 2018**

**"The Feast of 'I am'"**

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**John 6:51-59**

**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20**

The last thing God needs from us today is for any of us to read this text literally in a form of childlike literalism. Here's how Eugene Peterson interprets this text:

*"Only insofar as you eat and drink flesh and blood, (the flesh and blood of the Son of Man), do you have life within you. The one who brings a hearty appetite to this eating and drinking has eternal life and will be fit and ready for the Final Day."*<sup>1</sup>

You can believe every word in the Bible is literally true if you want, but for my money this is clearly a case of Jesus speaking in the language of metaphors. To be clear, the rest of the Bible is certain in its prohibitions of eating flesh and drinking blood. The whole notion of Jesus' use of metaphors in John are understood as among those known as the "I am" sayings such as implied in this text, "*I am the bread*," and, "*I am the wine*," both constructed on a platform already well used by Jesus in the form of his "I am" sayings.

Remember in this spring's Lenten services, as Eric, Kelly and I explored the seven "I am" sayings of Jesus? We assumed Jesus was using these claims as a way of describing himself to his followers. In Greek, they are known as the *egō eimi*. That's the whole point of an "I am" statement. An "I am" statement is a claim about accepting one's existence and one's identity. You may ask: "Who's preaching this morning?" Answer: *Egō eimi* = I am. *Egō* is the first person pronoun, I, me, my; *eimi* is a verb of being, of ordinary existence.

There are "I am" statements all across the pages of the Bible. When Moses encountered God in the desert through a burning bush that was not consumed, he speculated the obvious question of authority as God instructed him to go back to the land where he had killed an Egyptian slave master to demand that Pharaoh free the entire tribe of Israeli slaves. "But what shall I say when the Pharaoh asks, 'Who sent you?'" Moses asked of God, who replied curtly, "Tell him *I am* has sent you," "*Egō eimi* has sent you."

In ancient cultures from the beginning of time, this has been how people talked about themselves. *I am* is the foundational beginning for my self-acceptance and my claim of existence. It's me staking a core idea of who I am. *I am* = my self-statement, a confession of sorts, a way of indicating that *I am* someone with the power to make declarations about me and about my mission in life. This is the key

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<sup>1</sup> John 6:53-54, Eugene Peterson, *The Message*

to understanding all things we accept about what we learn is the position of first person: I, me, my. We are cautionary about these positions as a resistance to ego-centrism, but nevertheless, having a core sense of self is required to live as a healthy and whole person. We use "I am" thinking to help us acknowledge the realities of our existence and identity.

Comedian Grady Nutt wrote a simple little book about this, called, *Being Me*. Here's his summary statement: *I am a person of worth created in the image of God to relate and to live.*<sup>2</sup> (Remember how to diagram a sentence?) A foundational understanding of *I am* (*egō eimi*) is about existence and identity. More specifically, it's about our acceptance of our existence and about our identity in living our lives in service to that existence. It's about calling. It's about mission. It's about our willingness to engage the world.

These words by Jesus are a mystery and these metaphors he uses to talk about himself comes in the form of "living bread," and "living water." Jesus presses the comparisons to their breaking point by commanding that *unless* you eat of his flesh and drink of his blood, you will have no part of him. These metaphors and mysteries are all tied together in some demanding way together forcing us to think deeply about what we believe about this one we call Lord.

When we gather at our table, we hear the words of Jesus, "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" This table is then a feast of sacred memory built around the idea that Jesus broke into the human saga by becoming one of us. The invitation to eat and drink in Jesus' memory is built on the notion that we take Jesus as our holy meal. We are to consume and internalize the Jesus that lived out what it means for God to be in our midst. This internalized Jesus is our friend, our guide, our inspiration. Jesus' plan is that we will become an incarnation of God because we have feasted at the table where the bread is broken and the wine is poured.

I've struggled this week with this text, don't you know, so I asked my colleague Eric what he had on this text and he gave me this story: During the Nazi oppression of Poland, Franciscan Friar Maximillian Kolbe was a Polish priest who provided shelter for thousands of Jews and was an active voice against Nazi violence. He was subsequently arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned at Auschwitz. When a fellow prisoner escaped, the Nazis cruelly selected ten other prisoners to be executed in reprisal. As they were lined up to die, one of the ten cried out, "My wife! My children! I will never see them again!" At this, Maximillian stepped forward requesting to die in his place. His request was granted, and he led the other 9 prisoners in song and prayer as they awaited death. That was August 14, 1941.

In background of this act of sacrifice, Maximillian had previously lived in Japan and founded a monastery on the outskirts of Nagasaki. Four years after his martyrdom, on August 9, 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, but his monastery miraculously survived. Maximillian's feast day, (when Christians around the world celebrate his life and sainthood as a hero of the church), falls one week after

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<sup>2</sup> Grady Nutt, *Being Me, Self, You Bug Me*, Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1971

Nagasaki Day. So, in August each year, believers spend the week reflecting on the best and the worst that human beings are capable of. Father Kolbe was canonized in 1982 and declared a martyr of charity. John Paul II declared him "The Patron Saint of Our Difficult Century."

As followers of Jesus, we are to consume him. We take up his calling in our life. We live his spirit in the world. We are to eat his mission in life and we are to drink the remembrance of Christ. When you feast on Christ in this way, God will call you to service. That's why we feed children in this community through our backpack program. That's why we support our mission partners. That's why once a month, we prepare a home-cooked meal and invite the community. That's why we send our youth to Frakes Kentucky to address the needs of poverty. That's why we partner with our local schools for the common good. That's why we have partnered with the family that now lives in our parsonage. That's why we have a shawl ministry believing God's comfort can be experienced as warmth. That's why we open our hearts as wide as God's embrace and live out a radical welcoming and affirming friendship with all God's children with no exceptions. That's why we pray for the >500 children of immigrant and asylum refugees forcibly separated from their families. That's why we support our Preschool and support our teachers and educators. That's why we love and support the older adults in this community

Why? That's why ... because Christ was incarnated in the world and now Jesus is in us! We should understand Maximillian was one who fully identified with Christ in his life. He took great risks for the sake of love and life which brought him in direct conflict with the darkest powers of our time. He did so knowing Christ would have done the same, and being grounded in Christ's resurrection gave him the courage to take the incarnated Jesus into his own being, into his heart, into his mind, and into his soul.<sup>3</sup> Take heart all of you who have accepted your existence and identity as Christ's followers. Live fully in the eternal life-giving, generous, and ever gracious love of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Eric Moeller for the illustration of Fr. Maximillian Kolbe