

An insistent invitation: John 6:51-58

Which would you rather do, contemplate belief or consume the flesh and blood of Jesus?

by [Matt Fitzgerald](#) in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

I grew up on a sterile communion ritual: Jesus' flesh was never mentioned. There were neatly cubed pieces of white bread and silver thimblefuls of grape juice, but we did not talk about the blood. On Christmas and Easter the deacons wore tuxedos as if they were distributing hors d'oeuvres at a cocktail party. No one sprayed disinfectant on the elements, but there was an antiseptic quality to our celebration. God was involved, but contained, cubed and carefully distributed.

My favorite moment was the ritual's conclusion, when worshipers dropped several hundred communion cups into slots behind the pews. I liked the hint of disorder in the brief, chaotic cacophony of clinking cups.

Then I became a minister, and the first church I served celebrated communion at an altar rail. Rather than receiving the sacrament at a safe distance, worshipers came forward and knelt right before me. When I held out the loaf and the cup, the people tore large, ragged hunks off the bread and plunged them into the wine. I stood above them, embarrassed. I was ashamed of the smacking lips and the odd rivulet of wine running down the side of someone's mouth. There was the occasional red-wine mustache and even a whistling inhale some folks made as they devoured the elements. The entire enterprise was too intimate, too odd, too *fleshy*.

After Jesus said, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh," his listeners immediately asked, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" I had a similar response: "How can these people eat Christ's flesh?"

Just before this Jesus had said, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life." Then he insisted, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you will not live."

Which would you rather do, contemplate belief or consume the flesh and blood of Jesus? Most of us would rather think about Christ and belief, even when our thinking leads us to question the premise that gets it rolling in the first place: “Does God really need our faith in order to save us?”

Our aversion may be typical of our Protestant problem. I blamed my distaste for rail communion on an old prejudice. “It feels too Catholic,” I said, then strong-armed my congregation into a more orderly celebration. If I’d been honest I would have said, “It makes me feel too close to God, to God’s fleshy reality. Let’s sit in the pew and think instead.”

Sometimes it seems we have imprisoned Christ inside our minds, turning him over and over like a rock in a tumbler until he is polished and smooth, pleasing and easy to believe in. But Jesus is not content to live inside our minds. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” John’s Gospel suggests that it’s not enough to understand Jesus (as if we ever could). Even belief in him may be insufficient. Jesus wants to move out of our minds and into our mouths, into our lives in a very real and even startling way.

I once worked as a support person for a group of developmentally disabled men who all had their own apartments. I helped them run errands, fill prescriptions, make dinner. In my first week of work I walked a client home and stood in the doorway as he entered. He invited me in for a Coke. I declined, and he invited me again. I said no, and he repeated himself. After four invitations he took offense. “Come in!” he shouted. “I’ve got more pop than you can handle!” I backed away, unnerved. He never invited me in again. We did not become friends. Years later I regret having rejected his hospitality, unhinged as it might have been.

But I hear it echoed in Jesus’ insistence that we eat his flesh and drink his blood. He says it over and over, seven times in these seven verses, and though Christ may have more blood than I can handle, more flesh than I can manage, he will never stop issuing the invitation. He will give it again and again our whole lives long.

John’s Gospel does not feature the familiar scene at the Last Supper. There are no words of institution, no instructions to “take and eat” and remember Jesus in a gentle memorial meal. Instead we get this odd, insistent passage. It is as if John were saying to us, “Imagine how your relationship to God would change if you swallowed your embarrassment and your inhibition in order to swallow nothing less than the flesh and blood of Christ himself. Imagine what would happen if his blood

washed away all of your timidity, if you drank his love without reserve, if you left church with a piece of Jesus stuck between your teeth.”