

Sunday, August 19, 2012: John 6:51-58

Perhaps we should not be too hard on the people who ate their fill on the mountain and chased Jesus down on the other side.

by [Audrey West](#) in the [August 8, 2012](#) issue

My nephew is a walking question mark. What's for dinner? When will my daddy get a job? Will Grampa live to be 100? He does not know it, but his questions sound a lot like the ones that pop up in my news feed: How safe is our food supply? What will happen to the economy? Can Medicare cope with the rising number of baby boomers entering the system? Questions surround us, with more added each day in the face of every technological advance, political debate, ecological disaster or family crisis. It takes a special kind of wisdom to sort out which questions are the important ones.

The disciples found plenty of questions to ask both before and during their time with the earthly Jesus. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). "How can these things be?" (John 3:9). "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" (John 6:60).

Perhaps, then, we should not be too hard on the people who ate their fill of the bread on the mountainside and chased Jesus down on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Like people today they look for answers. "What must we do to perform the works of God? . . . What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe in you?" (John 6:28, 30).

The answers they received are not the ones they expected or wanted. Such is the way toward wisdom, after all. "Believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29). "I am the living bread that came down from heaven . . . the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Over the past couple of years I have become acquainted with a network of indigenous Pacific Islanders who provide in-home care for the ill and infirm in our

community. Samuel, as I'll call him, likes to bring food whenever he comes to the house: cabbages, potatoes, apples and bread. So much bread! Sometimes there is no room for all of it, so we put it in the freezer. As we chatted during a break between caregiving and household chores, Samuel told me that he is descended from a long line of chiefs on his home island. "My great-great-grandfather was a cannibal," he exclaimed. "They say he ate more than 900 men, and it made him a strong and powerful man." I tried to mask my horror. "He buried some of the bodies under his house," Samuel continued. "You can read about it at the museum," he added, in case I doubted his story.

"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Did I hear that correctly? I think of the power ascribed to Samuel's great-great-grandfather: the power of 900 men. I picture the remains of bodies supporting the pillars of that island house, a distant culture's exemplar of conspicuous consumption. Two thousand years of theology and interpretation have buffered us from the horror of this image. Why would Jesus teach with such a shocking metaphor?

Perhaps shock is necessary to drag our appetites and attention away from the cultural drive to conquer and consume, whether the object of consumption is the earth or one another. We are driven toward things that do not bring life. A bumper sticker reads, "Born to shop," as if our highest calling is to spend our resources detecting a good sale instead of discerning a good soul. Maybe it takes a little shock and horror to turn us toward the kind of consumption that brings life.

The first words out of Jesus' mouth in John 1 took the form of a question: "What are you seeking?" (v. 38, ESV). The question invites—even demands—a response. What are you looking for? When your belly is filled, what do you need? Deep inside, in the hungry places of your heart, where 1,000 Facebook friends, a new car or money in the bank cannot touch, what is it that you seek?

The disciples got to the heart of the matter by asking, Where are you staying, where do you abide? The rest of the Gospel of John is a response to that question: "Come and see" (John 1:39).

Come and see the Word made flesh that dwelt among us. Come and see what it looks like to participate in the incarnated life. Come and see a life that is more about

its quality than about its quantity, whether it is a quantity of years or a quantity of what our culture tells us we should all want to consume. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them,” Jesus says. Find the answers to your questions in this: consume the fullness of God that it may abide within you. After all, you are what you eat.