

August 11, Ordinary 19B, (John 6:35, 41-51)

We need to wrestle with the meaning of Jesus' flesh as bread, bread we are to consume.

by [Kelli Joyce](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue

Mayra rivera dedicates a full chapter of *Poetics of the Flesh* to the ways the word and concept of flesh appear in the Gospel of John. In the theologian's reflection on John 6, she refuses to let readers turn away from the various visceral connections that Jesus draws between bread and life and his own flesh, noting our temptation to avoid the scandal of these strange words and their meaning—not by rejecting them outright but by rendering them “mere” symbols, metaphorical stand-ins for abstract and immaterial truths. Perhaps those who rejected Jesus on account of this extended bread discourse did so not because they misunderstood him but because they were willing to take him at his word. And perhaps the many Christians who have accepted these words have done so by refusing to allow them to mean anything like what they say.

What they say is this: his flesh is bread. We are to eat the bread that is his flesh. Eating his flesh is eating the bread of life; in order to live forever, one must eat the bread that Christ gives for the life of the world. Which is, as we've established, his flesh.

Yet despite our being given so many different versions of the statement, it remains so easy to try to make it say something else, a vaguer and more generic truth. *Jesus sustains us. We yearn for what Jesus offers. What Jesus offers is something we need daily, not just once.* But in so many of these cases, where Jesus says “flesh,” over and over and over, we substitute his teachings or his life or the idea of him. He is surely both Word and flesh, but here it is not words with which he promises to feed the world, it is with his body. To try to get around it is not to find a way to accept it, it is to give up on accepting it. Jesus will not offer us the words we would prefer to hear or ideas that are easier for us to make sense of and be comfortable with. There is a reason that it is this speech that causes him to lose so many of his followers, to the point that he asks the Twelve if they, too, intend to leave him.

After taking so much time to emphasize the importance of taking Jesus' actual words here very seriously, it may seem like cheating or retreat for me to acknowledge that his earthly body, resurrected and ascended to the right hand of God, is not in any way available for our physical consumption. Nor, for that matter, was his earthly body composed of bread. But the point is not that Christians have erred by interpreting this language as symbolic rather than literal—it has to be symbolic. But the symbols Jesus chooses here are upsetting; they are carnal and bloody and demand to be considered in that light. Our living depends on Christ's bodily living. We live by means of his death; we take our nourishment from his physical life offered up for us. His body becomes part of our physical body. Our bodies become part of his body. The boundaries that we would draw between us and him will not hold; the boundaries that we would draw between the spiritual and the physical will not hold; the boundaries that we would draw between ourselves and others who share in the one bread that is his flesh will not hold.

There is an obvious sacramental reading available to us here, and it is a good one. The same one who declares his flesh to be bread for eating in John also declares bread to be his own body and wine to be his blood in the synoptics. "Do this," he says, "in remembrance of me." In Holy Communion we have an embodied opportunity to lean into the symbolic reality Christ declares in John 6. We accept Christ's offering of himself in our participation in the memorial meal he established; we eat and drink together and our bodies are transformed.

Jesus wants to transform—wants to save—more than our intellects, more than disembodied souls. His saving work was done in flesh, to save and redeem us as our whole bodily selves. Like with the manna in the desert, we may ask ourselves, "What is it?" But like manna, Christ's body isn't primarily given to us in order for us to understand it, but to consume it—and, having taken and eaten, to live.