

# Flesh and blood

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, August 23, 2009: the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on John 6:56-69*

Ah, August in this City of New York. I actually like being here in the city in the summer months, which puts me in a small minority. For me, the novelty of the city's summer quietness and slowness (relatively speaking) outweighs New York's summer weather. Usually. The nasty heat and humidity of this past week almost did me in. What I like about the summer here is that the city is quieter, at least the less famous parts, and much less crowded, with only a few million of us left here, rattling around. You can get into movies and nice restaurants without having to stand in line or make reservations far in advance.

Last week I ventured into the countryside of Connecticut to visit friends, who are the soul of gracious hospitality. Both happen to be wonderful cooks, and they've grown a garden again this year—or tried to. Much of their garden has molded or just not produced because of the unusually wet summer. But we feasted on ripe tomatoes, crisp zucchini, fragrant basil and mint right out of their own garden, supplemented with freshly picked vegetables from the local farmers' markets. We savored a delicious dinner at a local restaurant before walking across the town's main street to see the film "Julie and Julia," which starred 524 of Julia Child's recipes and more butter than I've ever seen at one time. Without our planning it, much of our relaxation and enjoyment centered around food. I guess that's not too unusual, given the summer bounty that many of us—though not all of us—are able to enjoy in this part of the world.

Here in New York, food is all around us, from the vendors on the corner to some of the best restaurants in the world. Even St. Bartholomew's has a restaurant attached to it (and a very good one, too). And yet, in this Big Apple, this city of over 20,000 restaurants, this foodie heaven, some are hungry and have no food.

These last several summer Sundays, our Gospel readings have all been from this sixth chapter of John, and all of them have been about food. About bread, specifically. I call these readings "the bread series." The little boy's five barley loaves and two fish that Jesus

somehow used to feed 5,000-plus, with 12 baskets left over. The crowds want a sign like manna in the wilderness; no, this is bread of God that came down from heaven and gives life to the world. The crowds don't understand, so Jesus gets more direct, saying, "I am the bread of life." His directness does not go over well. Who does he think he is? We know his parents. What's this come-down-from-heaven stuff? The conversation ratchets up when Jesus takes it to the next level: "I AM the living bread that came down from heaven." The crowds fight among themselves, and this series crescendos into Jesus' words we hear today: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

How do our 2009 ears hear those words? Do our eyes glaze over as we start to tune out? John's Jewish-community audience had exactly the opposite reaction. They were incredulous, appalled, scandalized at this talk of eating human flesh and drinking blood. There were laws about this. Orthodox Jews still soak meat 30 minutes in water, salt it, let it stand for an hour, then wash it again to draw out any residual blood. It would have been hard to have found language and images more offensive to John's community. This *is* a hard saying. Who can accept it? Who can listen to this?

As Episcopalians/Anglicans, we may take it for granted that Jesus' words about flesh and blood have to do with the Eucharist, because our worship is Eucharist-centered. Churches further over on the Protestant end of the spectrum, like the Baptist church I grew up in, had communion, The Lord's Supper we called it, once a quarter. The Episcopal norm is communion every Sunday. Here at St. Bart's, we are able to offer Eucharist four times each Sunday, and daily Monday through Friday as well. But of the four gospels in our scriptures, John's is the only one that does not show Jesus presiding at a last supper, offering bread and wine. Instead, in John's gospel, at Jesus' last supper with his disciples, he washes their feet. "Love others as I have loved you."

At Bible Study this week, our Wednesday group chewed on this gospel—pardon the pun—along with news and opinions from that day’s New York Times. The discussion turned to another movie about food, “Food, Inc.,” that tells some hard—scandalous—truths about how American food is grown and processed and marketed. (“Food, Inc.” by the way will be discussed at this Wednesday night’s “St Bart’s Discusses the Movies.”) Which led to the topic of Americans’ growing obesity. We are what we eat, and what we can afford to eat. Which led right into the current thorny problems of health care reform in this country. How can we take care of ourselves, all of us, and pay for it? It was impossible not to see how the economics and politics of food, obesity and health care are related, not only in this country, but all over the world.

I was fascinated—and touched—that our reflection moved so naturally from these gospel words about Jesus’ flesh and blood as food that gives life, to the very basic issues of our own flesh-and-bloodness: food and health. In John’s time, the words “flesh” and “blood” mentioned together was shorthand for the human body. Our own flesh and blood, our very human bodies, are where we live and the means with which we interact with the world and each other. We are made of flesh and blood ... and spirit. We need food— food that gives life— in order to live. We need healthy, circulating blood in order to live.

Here at St. Bartholomew’s, we say worship is the heart of what we do and who we are. And Eucharist, Holy Communion, is at the heart of most of our worship. We come together at this table to receive the body of Christ, the bread of heaven, and the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation. What does the food and drink received at this table have to do with the issues of food and health beyond our Park Avenue doors?

Sara Miles was raised as an atheist in a loving, atheist home. She was a journalist in the 1980’s in the Central American wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. She was also an experienced restaurant cook. One day, after she had returned to the United States to rear her daughter, Sara walked into her neighborhood Episcopal Church for no reason other than a reporter’s curiosity. She joined the crowd as a spectator, nothing more.

But she found herself swept right into the Eucharist, where someone pressed a piece of bread into her hand and handed her a goblet of sweet wine. “I was certainly not interested in becoming a

Christian,” Sara writes in her book, *Take This Bread*. “Or as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut.” (p. 57)

But when she ate that bread and took a sip of that wine, Sara says, “something outrageous and terrifying happened ... that impossible word *Jesus* lodged in me like a crumb ... I didn’t know what to do with it ... the word was indisputably in my body now, as if I’d swallowed a radioactive pellet that would outlive my own flesh.” (pp. 58-59) Sara kept going back to church with her questions multiplying, and found her very gradual conversion “socially and politically awkward, as well as profoundly confusing” and destabilizing (p. 70)

In time, Sara found herself starting a food pantry: tons of groceries, arranged on and around her neighborhood church’s altar, given away every Friday to hundreds of San Francisco’s marginalized people who brought their shopping bags. At the altar, they find food for their bodies; they find food for their souls in a sense of community and belonging; they find life. And that first pantry has multiplied into a dozen more.

Something happens when we take this bread. We chew it, we swallow it. It becomes literally part of us. No matter that when we take it, we may not understand everything about it. No matter that sometimes we may just go through the motions, wondering why we do this. No matter that the small white disk we eat actually bears little resemblance to a real piece of bread—or flesh, for that matter. Despite our imperfections and lapses in attention or even in belief, when we take this bread and this wine into our own bodies, something happens, even if we don’t realize it. “You are what you eat.” In our case, as Christians, when we eat together like this, we take the Word, the Word made flesh, into our flesh. When we do that, we become in some way an incubator for the Word made flesh to grow in our flesh and blood and be born in a new way through our body into the world (yes, that is a feminine image).

What does the Word made flesh borne into the world through our bodies look like? If you were at the Rector’s Forum this morning, you heard a parishioner describe a small charity he started. It is helping the rural poor in Malawi to grow nutritious food on their own land and start small agriculture and animal husbandry businesses to provide healthy food for their entire community. Two other parishioners returned just yesterday from Tanzania, where they were visiting “our” Carpenter’s Kids, the

100 children orphaned by AIDS that St. Bart’s has committed to making possible their education for five years. They report that because of a severe drought, there is very, very little food to eat there. Other people keep this space clean and safe and welcoming so that we can all eat and drink at this table. I’m sure you know many other ways the Word made flesh is being carried into the world.

Note that others who do not consume this bread and wine also care about—and work for—healthy food and healthy bodies in this country and around the world. And thank goodness they do.

In these human bodies of ours, our heart pumps continually. It pumps out nutrient-rich blood to the rest of the body, blood our bodies need to function healthily. The used blood returns to the heart where it is cleaned, given fresh oxygen, re-invigorated and then sent back out again to nourish the body’s tissues.

I experience Eucharist as the heart of the Body of Christ, the Church. We come here, spent, used, tired, perhaps feeling hopeless or helpless. When we gather around this table, we come together to meet Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, in the Word, and in each other. Then we are sent forth, pumped

back out into the world, strengthened, renewed, empowered to be “the hands and feet of Christ in the world.” Could it be that we, in our very human bodies, nourished by this flesh and blood, are being used to bring health into the larger body of God’s creation?

Body.  
Bread.  
Blood.  
Wine.  
Food.  
Drink.

What down-to-earth, everyday language to express such a mystery.

“The body of Christ, the bread of heaven.”

“The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.”

Welcome to this feast set in our urban wilderness, this celebration of joy.

Feast on the bread, the wine.

Let the Word, the Word made flesh, abide in you.

See where it takes you.

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*For information about St. Bartholomew’s and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022, or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at [www.stbarts.org](http://www.stbarts.org).*