

Flesh and Blood

August 16, 2009

(Pentecost 11 - Year B)

John 6: 51-58

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Our family spent this last week in Florida, on Panama City Beach. I had never been to the beaches of the Florida Panhandle before, or to that part of the Gulf Coast.

As far as the Gulf Coast goes, I have been used to going to Galveston since I was a little kid.

So what I was used to were the beaches of Galveston, with its brown sand and its muddy water.

However, the beach in Florida was much, much different than Galveston.

The sand in Florida is as white as sugar.

And the water of the Gulf of Mexico is not a murky brown color, But the water there is crystal clear and blue.

When I waded out into the water of the Gulf of Mexico, after a while of standing there, it can be a little freaky when you can feel sea creatures of some kind brushing up against your leg or your foot.

Since the water in Florida was so clear, I decided to put on swim goggles and take a closer look beneath the water to see what was swimming near my legs.

While I was standing in water that was up to my chest, I planted my feet firmly into the sand.

Then I put on my goggles and looked into the water of the ocean.

After a few minutes of standing very still, small fish began to appear. These little fish swarmed around the flesh of my legs and ankles and feet.

These little fish surrounded my legs and they were each trying to peck and nibble at my flesh.

I have always thought of myself as a person of good hygiene.

But these little fish were nipping at my flesh, eating at tiny organisms or bacteria that were on my legs and feet.

As those little fish nibbled and tickled me, I was amazed that they were

so attracted to my human flesh.

Jesus says something in the Bible that I gotta tell you sounds pretty creepy.

Jesus says in John's Gospel:

“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, [then] you have no life in you.”

I must admit that I have been pretty grossed out by this scripture passage.

Jesus, who seems to never stop talking about how he is the bread of life, takes the conversation to a whole new level of uncomfortability.

Jesus talks all about how he is the bread of life.

Then Jesus says:

“The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh [and] Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of his blood, [then] you have no life in you.”

When I picture Jesus saying that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood, I imagine a very disturbing image of a thick slice of extra rare roast beef with the red juice still oozing out.

Yet when I was in Florida wading in the clear Gulf waters,

When I saw those little fish attracted to my flesh,

I received a whole new picture of what Jesus means when he says that we must eat his flesh to have true life.

I now see that Jesus wants us to be attracted to him, to his human flesh.

Jesus wants us to be attracted to the flesh and blood of other human beings.

It seems that people in our world today are rejecting religion by the droves.

I hear people say that they do believe in God, yet they do not believe that the Christian life is really any different from any other religion.

Yet the Christian way of life *is* different than any other religion.

All other religions have the goal of making people more holy and more divine.

Yet Christianity is the only religion with the goal of making people more fully human.¹

Christianity is the only religion where the goal is to drink deeply of the red blood of humanity.

Christianity is the only religion where the goal is to dig our teeth into human flesh.

Christianity is the only religion where God walks around among us - and becomes flesh.

When I was in junior high school, I was a part of my church youth group.

On the weekend closest to Valentine's Day, our youth group went on a Sunday afternoon to visit a nursing home - and to pass out long stemmed roses to the elderly.

When we walked in the doors of the nursing home, we were hit with the smell of humanity, in the form of the smell of human urine.

We walked down dimly lit halls, filled with women and men in wheelchairs, whose flesh was hunched over and wrinkled.

We knocked on doors and timidly gave our red roses to those whose flesh was half listening to TV sets with the volume turned all the way up.

As I walked down the hall of that nursing home, I must have been about 12 years old.

And I will never forget that an elderly woman in a wheelchair rolled up to me and desperately asked:

“Little boy, would you please hold my hand?”

As a 12 year old boy, I was frightened - and a little grossed out, truthfully - by her request.

I was frightened, just as Jesus' followers were grossed out when Jesus told them:

“Unless you chew on the flesh of humanity, then you have no life in you.”

But I did hold that woman's hand.

Her flesh felt cold and clammy.

¹ See Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *An Altar in the World*.

And my hand felt warm and sticky.
I looked into her tearful, lonely eyes and she looked into mine.
But, as I tried to pull away, she would not let go of my hand.
I tried to let go, but she was attracted to my human flesh, just as those
little fish in Florida were attracted to human flesh.

On that Valentine's weekend in that nursing home,
In that lonely, old woman in a wheelchair,
God became flesh - and dwelt among us.

Jesus says:
Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man,
Unless you hold on to the fleshy hand of an old woman who won't let
go,
Unless you become more fully human,
Then you have no life in you.

Because the abundant life, the life that lasts forever,
Is a life that is fully human:
A life that reveals God in wrinkled flesh covered with Vick's vapor rub.
The Christian life is not about becoming more holy,
But about becoming more fully human.

So chew on the flesh of the Son of Man and drink deeply from the cup
of human suffering.
Stick your flesh into the waters of life, to be nibbled and hugged by all
sorts and conditions of people.
Walk into places that smell of urine.
Grab the hand of someone who is lonely and don't let go.

Become fully human,
And you will live forever.

AMEN.