

“Flesh and Blood”
John 6:51-58
August 15, 2021
Rev. David Hutchinson

If you had to choose between FOOD and GOD which would you chose?

Would you starve physically and keep God in Jesus...or

...would you eat food - - and give up God?

There are Christian martyrs who have chosen to die physically for their faith.

Those martyrs knew that in dying - - they would live.

They knew that real life is in God - - to the extent they were not afraid to die physically.

Knowing that - - is what the scripture reading for today - - is about.

According to John’s gospel - - God IS food - - Jesus IS food.

Communion with Jesus - - is the basis for life.

Like food is the sustenance - - of the body.

John’s gospel reports Jesus - - making this point - - vividly.

According to John, Jesus said,

“Eat my flesh and drink my blood”

Not just once - - but three times.

According to Jesus - - eating his flesh and drinking his blood is how we - - abide.

Abide in me - - Jesus said.

God the father - - abides in Jesus.

And Jesus abides in us and we abide in Jesus.

In the flesh.

These words were intended to be shocking - - and they are shocking still.

Fundamentally - - they mean - - that faith is NOT a concept - - nor thought nor idea.

Faith - - is incarnate.

Faith - - is survival.

Because we - - are mortal.

We are carnal.

We are dependent.

We are vulnerable - - human - - fleshly - - blood filled - - beings.

We depend on God - - in Jesus - - the incarnate.

We depend on God - - like we depend on food.

Without God - - we would die.

That's how John's gospel sees it.

In order to understand and appreciate this shocking language a bit more we have to dig into Greek and Hebrew - - and the culture of the ancient near east - - where these words and the document that is John's gospel - - originated. / That's what I hope to do in the next few minutes. / I avoided these verses in preaching and teaching for decades. / They were shocking enough - - and I was not clear enough - - that letting them be seemed safest.

There is plenty in the Bible to let be - - if you don't understand it.

Misinterpreting something - - can be dangerous.

But I have spent time digging - - and feel confident to talk about it now.

So - - the place we begin is with a Hebrew idiom or figure of speech.

In the language of Hebrew - - and in the culture of the ancient near east - - there was a common expression - - or metaphor - - meaning "the whole person". / The Hebrew words that make up this expression are "bessar" and "vedam".

In Hebrew, “bessar vedam” are the words “flesh and blood”. / And taken together in succession, they mean “the whole person”, or “human” or “mortal”. / So when the Hebrews of John’s day wanted to say someone is mortal, or someone is human or someone is the whole person, they said they were ‘flesh and blood’.

I’ll return to this usage in Hebrew in a little bit.

Bit first it’s important to switch to Greek.

The NEW Testament is written in Greek and then translated. / The Old Testament is written in Hebrew - - and that is the original language of the early followers of Jesus. / But many of the followers also came from Greek culture - - and so they expanded and translated and remembered and recorded things in Greek.

John’s gospel is written in Greek - - for example.

In the story for today - - John uses the Greek words “sarx” and “aima”.

“Sarx” means flesh - - and “aima” means blood.

This is how John translated this ancient Hebrew expression.

“Bessar vedam” in Hebrew - - became “sarx aima” in Greek.

Who cares? / Well - - anyone who wants to understand the Bible - - instead of misinterpret it. / Only - - anyone who wants to really understand what Jesus is talking about.

SO - - I hope you care enough about that to bear with me for a few more minutes.

Here’s the thing: Greek has several ways to say “flesh” - - and Hebrew has only ONE.

So the word John’s gospel chooses tells us something about meaning. / And John chooses “sarx” NOT “soma”. / Soma which is the root of somatic - - means body or corpse. It is a word for the substance of the physical body. / Sarx on the other hand - - means not only “flesh” - - but things like life and lust and human!

John's word expands the Greek mind to consider things like - - life and blood - - lust and blood - - flesh and blood - - meaning to be human. / To be mortal.

Now if you wonder if the Bible ever uses this expression I was talking about - - that is the expression, "flesh and blood" - - to mean "human" - - well it DOES!

In the most Hebrew of the gospels, Matthew, chapter 16 refers to "flesh and blood" as a way to say - - humans. / Same in 1 Corinthians: "flesh and blood" cannot inherit the kingdom it says. / Meaning humans.

And one shocking thing about John then - - is that John says that the way we mortals inherit the kingdom - - is through the "flesh and blood" of Jesus. / So - - human flesh and blood OR human humanity alone can not inherit the kingdom - - but human flesh and blood - - UNITED with the flesh and blood of Jesus - - can!

Not human humanity alone - - but human humanity abiding in Jesus humanity!

Jesus was NOT just an inspirational moral philosopher.

Jesus was God - - in flesh and blood.

Jesus was God - - living - - in the world of humanity.

That's what John is talking about.

John is expanding on Hebrew idiom or expression "flesh and blood" that means human.

The most striking case of the New Testament using the expression "sarx aima" to mean "human" is in Paul's letter to the Galatians. / Most places in the New Testament - - translators have opted to translate this literally as "flesh and blood". / But in Galatians many of the main translations actually translate the two Greek words "sarx" and "aima" AS "human".

The Jerusalem Bible says "human being"

The New English says "human being"

The NRSV says “human being”

The King James and the OLD RSV opt for the literal “flesh and blood”

The NIV chooses “man”

And the English Standard says “anyone”

Flesh and blood - - meaning - - anyone human - - according to Galatians 1:16.

People who originally read this would have known this expression. / But we live in a completely different culture - - and may miss the meaning - - if we assume we know. / OR more dangerously - - we might mis-interpret this.

It HAS actually been misinterpreted - - by a few people - - who think it is a literal reference to cannibalism - - and means that Jesus recommends that Christians engage in the practice of cannibalism. / I’m not making this up. / You see why I say dangerous?

To reinforce cannibalism AS a misinterpretation - - return to the original Hebrew culture.

The Torah strictly forbids and Jew from eating blood!

Life that was “in the blood” is RESERVED for the religious practice of sacrificial atonement in the Holy of Holies. / Blood - - renews life - - for Hebrews. / It is sacred - - and NEVER to be eaten. / That’s what Kosher food - - is all about! / No Jew would eat blood.

So Jesus words here - - were meant to be shocking!

They were said at the time of the Passover!

John chapter 6 says it was the time of the Passover.

Which is when Jews eat the Passover lamb - - whose blood is sacred.

Jesus - - is saying - - that HE is the lamb.

The way to life...

And the way to life - - is NOT some philosophy - or idea - - or inspiration.

The way to life - - is complete UNION with Jesus.

Flesh and blood.

The WHOLE human - - in complete dependence on God.

We depend on God - - like the body - - depends on food.

If you asked John to choose between food and God - - he would probably say that it isn't
a choice - - they are the same. / God IS food - - for John.

We depend on God - - that much.

Without God - - this flesh and blood - - will die.

That's what it means to abide in God, for John.

What would our lives be like - - if we lived as if we depend on God that way?

What would our church be like - - if our faith - - was as important as food?