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by Mary M. McGlone

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Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Proverbs 9:1-6

Psalms 34

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

"I am the living bread ... the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." John tells us that as soon as Jesus finished saying that, the people in the synagogue got into serious arguments with one another — a sign that he had hit a nerve and that their opinions were fiercely divided. Just what was Jesus trying to tell people that got them so upset?

Although the most literal, small-minded critics in the crowd focused on the yuck factor of drinking blood, the really serious critics were those who understood just what Jesus was saying and protested his audacity or marveled at its implications.

As we continue to read Chapter 6 of John, it might help to imagine it as a dramatic presentation in which the Passover and the Exodus form the background scenery. Those who listened carefully to Jesus understood that he was presenting himself as God's gift in their day just as surely as the manna had been God's gift for their ancestors in the wilderness. They caught the full impact of his implication that he was there in flesh and blood to save them more completely than the paschal lamb and its blood had saved their ancestors on the night of the Passover. They realized that he was saying that union with him was the way to eternal life.

Trying to comprehend Jesus' explanations of bread, flesh and blood with contemporary scientific categories is like memorizing French vocabulary to improve your grasp of Chinese. Jesus was speaking the language of heart and soul, not chemistry and physics. Jesus himself gave us the best explanation in a very similar discourse at the Last Supper when he said, "I am the vine and you are the branches" (John 15:1-8).

In both discourses, Jesus bids his followers to allow his life to flow through them by using metaphors of the most intimate connection possible. When he presents himself as bread, flesh and blood for the eating, the invitation is to receive and take him in such that his very life becomes our own. With the image of vine and branches, the connection is even more intimate because the branch grows out of the vine.

Sacramental theology teaches about the transformation of bread and wine, but Jesus points us beyond concentration on those elements. Jesus speaks of flesh and blood as the medium of his presence. According to Jesus, the reason he took flesh and blood was to be like the vine which gives life. He is present to transform everyone "who feeds on me" so that they will live forever.

Jesus was claiming to be the meeting point between the Father and humanity. That meant that taking him in was the way to eternal life and, to such a transformation that those who accepted him would become his branches, they would share his life as truly as he shared the life of the Father.



(Mark Bartholomew)

Jesus' message could have seriously upset people from two very different perspectives. First of all, the guardians of orthodoxy bent on protecting or defending the holiness of God were convinced they were hearing blasphemy. Jesus' teachings presented God as all too immanent, all too tangible, in a word, all too incarnate.

People on the other end of the spectrum recognized the immeasurable potential and overwhelming responsibility Jesus' teaching implied. Worship would never get them off the hook if they were called to live the love of God to the degree that Jesus was suggesting. Jesus said as much when he told the disciples, "Live in my love," or more pointedly, "Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do and ... greater."

This Sunday's Gospel, like the reading from Proverbs about Lady Wisdom's banquet, doesn't really come to a conclusion. In our selection from Proverbs, Lady Wisdom's last words invite her guests to advance in the way of understanding.

Jesus' last words in today's Gospel offer the invitation to live forever. It's as though after five weeks of pondering the mystery of Jesus the bread of life, we are still not adequately prepared to come to a conclusion. John the Evangelist keeps us circling around this theme because we cannot easily fathom its depth. We need to see this mystery from a variety of perspectives in order to realize how limited our vision really is.

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Next week's Liturgy of the Word will call us to make a choice about our faith and what we will allow it to demand of us. For this week, the Scriptures call us to circle round, to ponder what Jesus said and what he meant, and to allow his words to disturb us as they perturbed his companions at Capernaum.

[Mary M. McGlone is a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet who is currently writing the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the U.S.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication [Celebration](#), a worship and homiletic resource. Sign up to receive [weekly Scripture for Life emails](#).

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