

One of my friends, Musho Sensei, told me a Zen teaching story—the story, in fact, that first drew her to the study and practice of Zen. Here is a version of it: One day, one of the Emperor’s warriors, a mighty samurai, came to Master Hakuin who was sitting in meditation. “Teach me the nature of heaven and hell,” demanded the warrior.

Master Hakuin looked him in the face and said, “What makes you think a scruffy, miserable worm like you might understand such insightful things? You are a hard-headed brute. Go away and do not waste my time with your foolish questions.” With a wave of his hand, the master returned to his serene contemplation.

Consumed with rage, the samurai drew his bushido sword to cut off the master’s head. Without moving a muscle, Master Hakuin said, “*That* is hell.”

Instantly, the samurai understood that he been feeding his darkness for so long that he now stood on the brink of destroying a righteous man in anger. Tears filled his eyes as he sheathed his blade, put his palms together and bowed to the Master in gratitude.

“And that,” said Master Hakuin without changing his expression, “*that* is heaven.”

Today is the fourth Sunday in a five-week series of readings in the sixth chapter of John. First, we heard John’s account of the miraculous feeding in which Jesus took, blessed, and distributed a little borrowed bread and fish that fed an enormous crowd. Then we heard passages of the “bread of life” discourse in which Jesus claims that he *himself* is the bread that God has sent from heaven—the bread that gives life to the world. Today Jesus makes the startling claim that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have eternal life.

And it is a startling claim, is it not? Shocking and perhaps even repulsive, especially to 21st century Christian ears. The claim was startling even in first century Capernaum, but not in the same way. When Jesus speaks of his flesh, there is no doubt that Jesus in John’s Gospel is referring back to the prologue, where John tells us that the Word of God became flesh. And when Jesus uses the word that translates into English as “flesh,” he means what the majority of first century Jews meant by the word. “The flesh” in Semitic usage meant the whole human being, not

just a part. Plato separated the body from the mind and spirit, not first century Jews. Jesus is referring to the entire tangible person—the whole person that exists in time and space in this earthly environment. Something that has meaningful reality when one touches it. “It is my *entire* self,” Jesus might say to us now, “not simply some abstraction, but my own wholeness that is true food.”

In the same way, his reference to his blood as true drink is not to promote some kind of ghoulish vampire practice. For most first century Jews, consuming blood was prohibited because they understood it to be the essence of life—the *soul* of the animal and *that* belongs to only YHWH. Again, Jesus might say to us, “My *entire* self—my body, my mind, my soul—the wholeness of my very life is true drink.”

The challenge of Jesus’ claim is for you and I to decide, as much as we are able, what we will feed on in this life: life or death? Will we choose to live like the samurai confronting Master Hakuin, feeding on envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity and resentment? Or will we choose to live to the best of our ability in settings of joy, love and hope? Will we choose to feed on humility, compassion and awe? Will we choose to take into our bodies, minds and souls the tangible realities of forgiveness, gratitude, and faith? These are the very realities that bind us to God—the God who took on flesh for us in a body that has been broken and whose life-blood has been spilled to create a path for us to a grace-filled life.

Now part of being real about our faith is recognizing that choosing what we allow ourselves to feed on is not always easy. We have within us constellations of conflicting forces and opposing impulses. We can gloss over the very real human condition that envy *and* generosity, self-protection *and* compassion, rage *and* serenity are all available within ourselves. To deny the less noble, the less life-affirming aspects of ourselves actually grants them power, but it is shadow power. Shadow power that can take us right to the point of striking another person in anger just as surely as if we had fed only the darkness in ourselves.

Wholeness, holiness, is not simple. The path that Jesus embodied is startling and counter-intuitive: We die so that we may rise to new life. We let go of our absolute certainty so that we may receive God’s still more awesome presence. We relax the grip on our defensive, egocentric selves so that we may give reign to our fully integrated, free-functioning selves.

The path that Jesus embodied involves the on-going practice and discipline of reconnecting—rebinding (that’s what the word “religion” means)—rebinding

ourselves to God, the source and end-point of our being. Without adopting fruitful rebinding practices, we can trap ourselves in the self-centered world of our own darkness. We start dwelling on what is lacking, what is wrong, on how things should be, but are not. We worry and complain about our needs not being fulfilled, our expectations not being met. We look at the world around us and see *only* violence, devastation and ecological disaster. We hunger and we thirst endlessly, and eventually someone or something outside of ourselves is entirely to blame.

But, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once said, “The line between good and evil does not pass between nations or religions, but right through every human heart.” To choose to follow the path that Jesus embodied is to return again and again to that which binds us to God. Feeding on the entire tangible self, the life-essence of the Risen Christ, opens our eyes and widens our hearts. Without *disregarding* the darkness, we see more of the essential goodness of the world, the miracle of life, the unfathomable gift of our own birth, and the preciousness of our relationships.

Feeding on the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood enhances our ability to approach and move through pain and fear with trust and compassion. The resulting expansion of love within us and around us increases our sense of gratitude, our awe at the world alive around us, giving us a taste of God’s feelings of pure joy. And as that awareness increases in strength and clarity, we see others no longer simply means to satisfy our own appetites and desires. We yearn less and less for a better past. We no longer hunger and thirst, but—filled with God’s loving, tangible presence—we welcome the future with an open heart, more fully present to God’s loving life-essence in every moment, just as it is.

An authentic spiritual life requires discipline and practice, and these can be a struggle. I don’t mean contentions about who’s right and who’s wrong, but the ongoing struggle for inner awareness—the striving within each of us individually and as a church community fed by Christ. Our endeavor as children of God to embody and reveal the tangible life of the Risen Christ in and for the world. Only in the company of others laboring in similar ways can we learn to know and befriend our darkness without being activated by it or overcome by it. Christ is the light, after all, that shines in the darkness and that cannot be overcome.

The discipline of spiritual life involves putting ourselves in circumstances where God can feed us, whether we feel like it or not. Putting ourselves in the midst of a manifestation—a specific and tangible incarnation—of the Body of Christ right here.

God cannot give what we will not receive. God cannot give peace, forgiveness and joy that we refuse to accept.

We receive and embody God's graces through the practices of a spiritual life in Christ. By coming to Mass to be fed. By praying, both in solitude and with each other. By studying and learning about scripture, liturgy and prayer. We receive and embody God's graces by coming deeper into the life of the parish, whether we feel qualified or not. By recognizing that all that we have and are, are gifts from God and cultivating a stance of grateful generosity related to all that God has given—everything from tangible resources to intangible relationships.

Let the life and love of God shine through your actions, your presence and the words you speak. Come deeper into the heart of Christ in this parish and let it nurture you in the patterns of rising from death and darkness; letting go to receive; transcending who you imagine yourself to be so that you can live into who God knows you to be. God will use your wholeness—*your* body, mind and spirit—to go out from this place filled with light to give to a world in darkness; full of life and love to touch and heal a world tormented by fear and death.

Christ will be with you when you go and here when you return: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."