

Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

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Jesus has been teaching about the Bread of Life since the feeding of the crowd that converged on him because they saw him making people healthy and whole. Since the giving of that sign, the crowd has continued to dwindle. Some people left because the free lunch was over. Some left because Jesus refused to be their king. Others left because they disagreed with his interpretation of scripture.

And now this morning, the people remaining with Jesus and the 12 apostles are listening to Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. Jesus is expanding a teaching that they have been hearing for days now. And some of them are murmuring. Our English interpretation of the text gave us: “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

There is a subtle difference with a tantalizing opening in John’s Greek that reads: “This *word* is difficult; who is able to hear it?” This word, this *logos*, is hard for the disciples, the “learners,” and so they wonder: “who is able to hear it?”

What Jesus has been teaching is not just new content poured into an existing and familiar way of thinking. He is not offering *information*. What Jesus is teaching is a *new* unexplored way of

thinking. He is offering *transformation*. And expansions of consciousness are hard.

Let me show you what I mean. As babies become toddlers, we discover that we are distinct from our surroundings. We start noticing that people and things exist on their own outside of us. And that realization allows us to start attaching sounds, names and words to objects. It's not easy work for babies, but we're drawn to it naturally and with practice, there's a change in our consciousness.

When we are somewhere around seven to 11 years old, most of us start learning to think beyond our own immediate viewpoint. One winter, Jennifer and I got a very excited phone call from one of our nieces. She was just a wee thing. "It's snowing at my house," she told us. "It's snowing at our house too," we told her. Silence. And then, she very calmly corrected us: "No," she said, "it's snowing at MY house."

It's confusing to be confronted with the possibility that other people might have different perspectives than ours. With practice, our thinking becomes a little less literal and concrete as we start to realize that not everyone shares our thoughts or opinions. Over time, there's another change in consciousness.

From about 12 years old through adulthood, most of us are able to learn that people may hold a wide variety of perspectives on the same situation. We get better at thinking about hypothetical situations and about circumstances that we have never actually experienced. We become able, with practice, to tolerate yet another change in consciousness.

These kinds of changes involve the *qualities* of our awareness that develop through stages. At 12 years old, we don't just have *more* information about the world than we did when we were two; the mind that we use to process information has become more complex and increasingly open to more and more perspectives.

It is basic human nature to investigate and experiment as we grow. That's how we develop our understanding of the world around and within us. Over and over again, with some active effort on our part and some guidance, our awareness is *transformed*.

And here at the end of the Bread of Life discourse, Jesus has taught a transformative lesson about the meaning of the sign he gave in feeding the multitude. His disciples stand at the brink of this new awareness and murmur: “This word is difficult; who is able to hear it?”

John’s Jesus is, of course, the Word made Flesh. His life energy is the life energy of God, the Source of life itself; the transcendent love of the Creator for creation. God’s love transcends creation *and includes* creation.

Jesus participates fully in human, physical life, do you see, even as he recognizes that he is not other than God. His identity flows from an awareness of his life-affirming, life-sustaining, non-dual relationship with God. “Just as the living Father sends me forth and I live through the Father whoever also feeds upon me, that very one will live through me.”

This is a change in consciousness.

This is an awareness so intently focused on the love of God that John’s Jesus can live and die as if death did not exist. His is a human awareness that also fully participates in the unity of the endless abundance of the life of God.

This new consciousness in Jesus, this word, is difficult because it shatters our familiar fixation on death and grants a glimpse of God pruned of all violence. This is hard precisely because by detoxifying and disempowering death, this word exposes the ultimate impotence of the schemes of violence that captivate us.

This teaching is difficult, causing even his immediate students to murmur, because it reveals the opening to life eternal as a share in Christ’s identity; the incredible enticement to live through the love and life of God. All who are able to hear what Jesus is teaching are guided into this new consciousness.

Rabbis in the synagogue at Capernaum have been stressing the infinite, heavenly “otherness” of God’s life and the finite, earthbound limits of human life. The prevailing consciousness of religious folks, including some of Jesus’ disciples, is based on the conviction that people originate on earth as physical beings with spiritual impulses.

Jesus stands that theology on its head. “This is the bread that has descended out of heaven,” he says. Jesus, himself, originated in heaven and manifested on earth.

The word that the disciples find difficult says that those who abide in Christ will realize that they also have their beginnings in the heart and mind of the Creator. And what’s more, those who abide with Christ will learn how to incarnate as more and more fully human until the fullness of God’s reign as a creation-wide community of God’s loving children.

“Does this teaching scandalize you?” Jesus asks. “Does it cause you to falter?” He is aware that he is puncturing a closely-held, comfortable and limited worldview. Maybe the rupture would be less painful, he muses out loud, if people saw the Son of Man starting from earth and rising to heaven. At least that might feel more familiar.

But John’s Jesus *is* the Word made Flesh, the perfect revelation of interdependent human-divine life; the Logos who was present with God and who was God in the origin of all existence. That is the spirit that transcends and includes all the many forms that it inhabits. That is the spirit that transforms flesh and gives it life.

Some will choose not to probe further into this awareness of human-divine life because it seems too hard to understand. Others will decide that this invitation does not include them – a poignant and painful refusal of God’s loving offer. Still others will try to moderate, domesticate or rationalize away God’s yearning for us to wake up to this relationship.

For those willing to explore further, trust is the first step. And the only next step is to stay with it. Abide with Christ.

Doctor of Sacred Theology, Fr. John Shea, wrote this: “We have to find the larger consciousness to which we will apprentice ourselves. We have to trust and believe in that consciousness long enough to learn from it...If the conscious-ness is aligned with Love, if the Bread is true, if the “flesh” and Blood is nourishment, then life flows in us. We have come not only [as Peter said to Jesus] to believe but to *know*, and we stay because eternal life is flowing.”

And so, as this emerging awareness dawns, we sing with the psalmist: “The sparrow has found her a house, and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.”

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