

SERMON- Proper 15 (B)
Charles R. Cowherd

Proverbs 9:1-6

Psalm 34:9-14

Ephesians 5:15-20

Good Shepherd
August 15, 2021

John 6:51-58

OPENING:

If your family was like mine, you had “Olympic fever” over the last month or so, watching our athletes go for the gold in Tokyo, and then anticipating the Winter Olympics coming up in a few months in Beijing.

I am going to suggest that the author of our Gospel reading ALSO had the Olympics on his mind when I wrote our passage.

But before I do that, here’s your obligatory historical tidbit from the Good Shepherd archives courtesy of Charles Cowherd.

50 years ago in the leadup to the 1972 Olympic Summer Games in Munich, there was an Exhibition basketball game played here in Fairfax County at Robinson High School between the Swedish Men’s Basketball Team and another team. And the hosts of the Swedes were none other than Good Shepherd parishioners.

So the thought of all these tall, athletic, blonde Swedes staying at Good Shepherd homes and maybe coming here to worship is a great one.

GOSPEL

But back to John Chapter 6, it’s been called the “Grand Central Station” of the 4th Gospel. So much stuff is going on that there is a lot to unpack and deal with. That’s why we spend so much time with every 3 years.

One of the things going on is the author is addressing the differences between Greek philosophy and Christianity.

The Olympic ideal of the human body becoming like a god’s reveals the difference. *Greek* gods come to earth and inhabit human bodies but they make them act better, look better, smell better. Jesus comes and puts his skin in the game and suffers and sacrifices.¹

So Greek philosophy liked this person named Jesus but did not like the yuckiness of it all and said “Sure, Jesus was God, but only ‘seemed’ to be a human.” He did not actually live and breathe and suffer like you or me.

¹ N.T. Wright Lecture/ interview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CxKn8ljncc>

John is pushing back against that here and saying, he sure was: “True Food and true drink”—strong incarnational language.

Jesus said “I am the Living Bread”—but Jesus is not flour and water. People always knew that, and the important part is taking that imaginative leap to understand this story by using other stories.

So you take this very long sermon, this discourse that John depicts Jesus giving, and you have to overlay the story of Jesus’ life, first, and then the story of Jesus’ death also. That that’s the primary lens you should be considering and thinking about it. Otherwise, it does not make much sense or have as much power.

We still have the Olympics, but Greek philosophy and is a long way away. I would like to tell another story ovetop of those to see if we can understand what John and Jesus was getting at.

CRADDOCK:²

This story is about a famous preacher, named Fred Craddock, who was a Disciples of Christ minister and professor affiliated with Emory University.

A few years back, Fred Craddock was invited to lead some kind of preaching mission in Winnipeg. When he finished Friday night, he noticed that it was spitting snow. His host told him not to worry, given that it was only mid-October. “Good,” said Fred, “because all I brought from Atlanta was this little, thin jacket.” Fred went to bed. But when he got up the next morning, he couldn’t open the door for all the white stuff that was piled against it. Snow driving. Wind howling. Temperature falling. Phone ringing. It was the host calling Fred’s motel room. I hate to tell you this, but we’re going to have to cancel this morning’s session. Can’t tell about the evening. But things look pretty bad. Nobody saw this coming. City’s not ready. Plows, not ready. Crews, not ready. Nothing’s ready. Worse yet, nothing’s open. In fact, I’m stuck in my driveway, meaning that I can’t come down to fetch you. So I don’t know what you are going to do about breakfast. But I do have an idea. If you can make it out of your room, walk down to the corner ... turn right ... go one block ... turn right again ... and you should be standing within shouting distance of the bus station. There’s a little cafe in there. And if any place is gonna be open, it’s gonna be open.

² <http://www.stpetersumc.info/worship/14-sermons/155-soup-welcome>

So Fred curses his luck, zips up his jacket, busts out his door, and goes in search of the little cafe. Two rights. Bus station. There it is. Wonder of wonders, it's open. But it's also crowded. It seems as if every stranded soul in the universe is crammed inside.

There is no place to sit. But some guy slides down the bench and makes room for Fred to squeeze in. Waiter comes over ... big burly guy ... non-shaven ... wearing half the kitchen on his apron. "Whatcha want?" he snarls. "Can I see a menu?" Fred asks. "Don't need no menu," the waiter answers. "Didn't get no deliveries this morning. All we got is soup." "Well then," says Fred, "soup it is. I like a little breakfast soup from time to time."

So the soup comes in a rather tallish mug. Looks awful. Shade of mousey gray. Fred half-wonders if that's what it could be ... cream of mouse. So he doesn't eat it. But he does use the mug as a stove ... cupping his fingers around it ... warming them on it.

Which is when the door opens once more. Wind howls. Cold surges. "Shut the blankety-blank door," someone shouts. Lady enters. Thin coat. No hat. Ice crystals in her hair and eyebrows. Maybe 40. Painfully skinny. Men slide over to make room for her at another table.

"Whatcha want?" shouts the guy with the greasy apron. "I'll just have a glass of water," she answers. "Look lady," he says. "We're crowded in here. We don't give no glasses of water. Either you order something or you leave."

Well, it quickly becomes apparent that she isn't able to buy something. So she rebuttons her coat and commences to leave. Whereupon a funny thing happens. One by one, everybody at her table gets up to leave, too. Followed by others ... at other tables. Even Fred (who still hasn't touched his soup) gets up to leave.

"All right ... all right," says the soup master. "She can stay." And he brings her a bowl of soup. With order restored, Fred turns to his table mate and says: "Who is she? She must be somebody important." To which the guy says: "Never saw her before in my life. But I kinda figure if she's not welcome, ain't nobody welcome." Which pretty much settled the matter, to the point where all you could hear (for the next few minutes) were soup spoons clinking against the sides of the mugs. Even Fred broke down and ate his soup. Which wasn't half bad, really. Some might even call it tasty.

Later on, he still couldn't make out the taste ... but he felt as if he'd had it before. But what was it? He couldn't remember. For the life of him, he couldn't remember. Then it hit him. Strangest thing, really. That cream of mouse soup tasted, for all the world, like bread and wine. That was it ... for all the world like bread and wine.

SYNTHESIS:

I love that story. And the only thing that we can do is keep telling that story “in remembrance” of him who lived that story. Keep living that story ourselves, keep offering ourselves up at the Table so Jesus does not “seem” to be real, that Jesus is not present only as a superhero on some Olympian level, but is present in our very selves and lives.

In that way, this is how the story is present in our own context, we are “Contaminated” when we participate in the Eucharistic meal, we get that bread in our bloodstream as we consume and are consumed by the “subversive memory of Jesus.”³

CONCLUSION

John gives it away by how he tells his story, by talking about “chewing” instead of eating and by not just saying “body” by saying “flesh.” Jesus is referring to his body, not simply his sinless, glorified body in heaven, nor simply a sterilized, white communion wafer in church. What we are being asked “to eat” is that other part of his body (the mouse soup!), the community, the flawed body of believers here on earth.”⁴

We are sharing, partaking, receiving becoming the Body of Christ, that eats and drinks together, congregating in diners in Canada, in dusty hills in Palestine and in churches in Burke, Virginia.

³ Ched Myers. 2018. *Binding the Strong Man- A Political Reading of Mark's Study of Jesus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 443.

⁴ Rolheiser, Ronald. 2014. *The Holy Longing: the Search for a Christian Spirituality*. Princeton, NJ: Image, 98.