

The Words of Eternal Life

John 6:56-69

Pentecost 12B

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Well, it's the best part of the summer when all the planting, gardening, watering and weeding is really paying off. We've been enjoying Luan's squash and peaches, and Tom's testimony about what's growing in the Nesbitt's garden this summer, and my wife Robin has made a nice spread of fruit for porch fellowship today. I see all the fruit and vegetable stands on nearly every road. It's the best part of the summer. What summer produce is your favorite? One time thirty years ago while driving to the beach on Maryland's Eastern Shore I stopped at a farm stand and bought some cantaloupes. They were as big as an NBA basketball, and they were the best cantaloupes I've ever had.

But now I want to shift gears - what about the foods that you don't like? When I was a kid the family policy was that you had to eat everything on the plate to qualify for a serving of dessert. No problem with the burger and potatoes those went right down the hatch. Salads were generally OK, and I especially liked carrots, celery and radishes. The cooked vegetables were always a problem. It wasn't fresh stuff, it was almost always from the can or the freezer. I remember the spinach sitting in a lukewarm clump at the far side of my plate. No exciting Popeye cartoon could combat the odious reality of that clump of soggy green leaves. In particular, I didn't like lima beans, those little barely green squishy things that obviously had been in the freezer for at least four hundred years.. Just eating one of them would make my stomach churn. To get the dessert I learned to bargain my mom down to eating just five of them, and then I would pour half the ketchup bottle on them. Only then would I eat lima beans.

Eventually I learned that someone else at the table had a serious food dislike, too. My father had some foods that he wouldn't eat: turnips and cauliflower. During the Great Depression that's what was on his table, and I guess he swore to

never eat them again because he'd had them at every meal for years and years. But they were never served at our table, so he didn't have to resort to the ketchup trick to get his dessert. Apparently, my Dad had veto power over menu items that I did not have.

When I got older I tried to have a more mature policy that if someone else made the effort and took the time to make a meal I would courteously (and bravely!) eat anything on the plate, without complaining, even if lots of lima beans. But to this day as I work my way around the dinner plate I always begin with the things I like, and save the things I like least until last.

I also became a vegetarian, and discovered, of course, that all of those vegetables are not poison but are just what the body needs. On top of that, my father has macular degeneration, and my eye doctor tells me that the best stuff to eat to prevent blindness is plenty of bright colored, leafy vegetables ... like spinach! (Fortunately, the doctor hasn't prescribed lima beans yet!)

One time our Rochester housemate Lisa made seaweed soup. I tried one spoonful and nearly gagged. That gag reflex is perfectly natural, by the way; it's built into your body to reject anything that seems poisonous! That evening after just one taste of seaweed soup I broke my rule and blurted out that it was horrible and I refused to have another spoon full. I was delighted when Lisa, who had been trying her best to sell us on her recipe, admitted that she, too, was unable to eat anymore,

A large crowd of people surrounded Jesus and the topic was food. In particular, bread, because people had followed him out into the wilderness, they got hungry, and Jesus multiplied the five loaves of bread so that the whole crowd was fed, and there were twelve large baskets of crumbs left over. But now the crowd has come back, still hungry of course, because those were tough times. But Jesus is saying something that they haven't expected.

Instead of multiplying more bread, as they had hoped, and even demanded, Jesus begins to talk about how the bread they

ate before is only partly satisfying, and that they should be looking for the bread that comes from heaven, the bread that opens the way to eternity, the bread that only comes from him, the bread that is, in fact, his own flesh, the bread that lasts forever.

According to John, the crowd responds to what Jesus has spoken: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" I love how the Bible often translates those ancient words so politely, but sometimes an English translation isn't enough; we need something in contemporary English. I know how I would have written that verse: "the crowd was gagging on Jesus' words". He had brought them a long way in his teaching, but this last serving was something they couldn't swallow! They had tried everything on the plate, especially the things they liked, but they wanted to skip to dessert without trying everything there.

It's a sad story, in some ways, because those folks were with him every step of the way, but with just one step to go, they backed away.

Are there things that Jesus teaches that you find hard to swallow? Maybe it's the way he welcomes people that you don't like? Maybe he sets too high a standard for forgiving people who have hurt you? Maybe it's because he asks you to always think first about giving rather than getting. Maybe because he asks you to trust God, instead of yourself? Maybe because he asks us to be honest? Maybe because he insists we live peacefully?

Any one of these, maybe all of them, might be hard for you to swallow, especially if you have a lifetime of habits of looking out for yourself, ignoring the needs of others, and pretending that God really doesn't matter much.

At the end of chapter six in John's Gospel, it appears that the majority of those who came seeking bread have left because they couldn't swallow the part about bread from heaven. Jesus even asks his disciples if they have the stomach to follow him anymore. I love Peter's answer: "Where else is there to go?" We could go back to living stunted lives, but you've got us hooked,

because you offer the things that last forever. Who else offers that? No one, except you. You have the words of eternal life.