

An Immersive Experience
A Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 15, 2021
The Rev. Robin Teasley

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 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." John 6:51-58

Last Monday I had a fully immersive experience with Van Gogh. Many of you may know that I love his art so it won't surprise you that I bought tickets to this event a year ago and waited with great anticipation for my appointed day and time with Van Gogh. I was not disappointed. The entire experience was overwhelmingly beautiful. I always love viewing Van Gogh's art, hanging quietly on museum walls, but this was different. We were surrounded by the art – on the walls, floor and ceiling, and it was all in motion. It was a living, moving, experiential event.

As we entered this immersive experience, we looked at pieces of his art as learning about Vincent's life, his challenges, his hopes, and his love of creation. Like many of us, Vincent's life was not perfect, not always healthy, and at times was a great struggle. But he was a person of faith who in his early life explored a call to ordained ministry. It turns out that his art became his ministry.

I've thought about this event all week and have concluded that it was a lot like church. There were readings and music, beautiful art, a community of people known and unknown who were gathered to share a love of Van Gogh's art. There was a room where we were invited to create our own art in the style of the artist, which reminded me of Sunday school crafts. There was a room for a virtual experience where we walked through Vincent's life, seeing and hearing what he saw and heard, much like our experience as we hear about the life of Jesus in the Gospel and absorb the beauty of our stained-glass windows. Then we entered a room where everything was moving. It reminded me of the liturgy of the Eucharist, all of us moving toward the table, receiving the bread, being surrounded by the communion of saints, and filled with the Body of Christ.

Last Monday's experience reminded me that in all of our diversity we are connected to one another; that life is both beautiful and hard, and that in the end, after the health and illness, joy and sorrow, life and death, there is something greater and more alive. There is a beautiful treasure, the art of our lives, that endures for those who come after us to experience and grow into and proclaim and share. There is a sense that even though it changes all around us, life continues and abides in us.

I wonder if this is what Jesus was conveying to his listeners when he explained to them that he is the living bread that came down from heaven. I imagine that what Jesus wanted them to understand was not something that could be explained with words alone, but something that needed to be experienced. And so he spoke in a metaphor they could understand because we all know that we must eat in order to live. And Jesus was never afraid of inserting some shock value, some hyperbole, into his messages, so he tells them he is the living bread that they will need to eat in order to live, really live. He is the flesh that becomes their flesh, that becomes the life of the world. He is the Word made flesh, the Incarnation.

Jesus offers us an immersive experience that allows us to take it all in, that invites us to literally take Jesus inside of ourselves. We can be filled, immersed in, Word and Sacrament when we gather in this place. We come here to focus on the One we love, our holy and Triune God, in all the ways our bodies have been created to experience – with sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. All of our senses are engaged in worship, as we receive the living bread from heaven.

Of course, we can come to church for all sorts of reasons. Maybe we come out of habit, or because we love connecting at coffee hour. Some of us come longing to help those in need, to be inspired and motivated to do acts of mercy and justice in the world. Others of us are here because we need respite from the world and are hungry to experience a moment of peace. We come to sing or to sit in the silence, to find comfort and support, and to be forgiven and healed. All of these reasons are an expression of our hunger and longing to experience Christ, and we have come to the right place. This is where Christ feeds us. This is where we experience his abiding love when we receive him in the Eucharist. This is where we receive the food that gives us eternal life, and Jesus invites us into this full, immersive experience.

The people who heard Jesus say, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” were not yet able to understand, were not ready to receive the living bread from heaven. They were not ready to abide in Jesus and live their lives in such a way that the world would see Jesus in them and be drawn by the Father into relationship with the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Honestly, I think we all have our days, maybe even our seasons of life, when we are not ready to receive the living bread and to be drawn by the Father into abiding life with Jesus. But God is merciful and patient and full of grace. Each week we are invited to God’s table to feast with the whole communion of saints, to hold each other up, and to be supported when we fall.

In the Eucharistic Prayer prayed in the monastery of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, MA, as the bread and wine made flesh and blood are raised up at the conclusion of the prayer, the priest says, “Behold what we are.” And the people respond, “May we become what we receive.” It is in the abiding that we become like Christ, come to deeper knowledge of Christ.

As we continue to abide and make the living bread visible in the world, we will face challenges, especially in the midst the continuing pandemic and everything else going on in the world. May we be kind and tolerant toward those who are struggling, and may we be gentle with ourselves. May we remember that we are abiding in the One who came down from heaven and who abides in us, and in the One who longs to create a work of art on the canvas of our lives. Always and everywhere we are invited into an immersive experience with God, and it is overwhelmingly beautiful. Amen.