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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

August 18, 2024

Proper 15, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14](#)

[Psalm 111](#)

[Ephesians 5:15-20](#)

[John 6:51-58](#)

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If you go to Moscow—which I can’t recommend because of the political situation, but maybe someday, when things change—you’ll surely go to Red Square, next to the Kremlin, and you’ll see the most famous cathedral in Russia, the one that appears on all the postcards, with its boisterous fairy-tale explosion of multicolored onion domes: St. Basil’s. It’s named after Basil the Blessed, a local saint who lived back in the 1500s and was a famous holy fool. There’s a tradition of this in Eastern Orthodoxy: people who break social norms and live in outlandish ways out of their dedication to God. And although he would eventually be buried there, he wasn’t really a fancy-cathedral kind of person. He wandered around naked, wore chains on his body, threw stones at rich people’s houses, and generally made people uncomfortable. One day during Lent, when all meat was forbidden, he went to Tsar Ivan the Terrible’s palace and handed the tsar a slab of raw beef. When the tsar refused, Basil said, “But Tsar—why fast from meat when you murder men?”

Sometimes it takes a fool to speak truth. After all, they're the only ones who can say things like that. They remind us that, all too often, true wisdom appears in the guise of foolishness.

We heard a lot about wisdom today. We heard about King Solomon asking God for wisdom and getting it: wisdom to rule skillfully and with justice. We heard Paul's exhortation to the church to live not as unwise people but as wise: soberly, filled with the Spirit, singing praises to God. And then in our gospel reading all this talk of wisdom runs smack into what sounds like the rankest foolishness. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Good question. This is scandalous, wild talk. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."

And Jesus even seems to be doubling down on the foolishness here. In this passage the word he uses for *eating* isn't the normal Greek word. It's a rougher word, a level or two down the scale of formality. It's used for animals eating, or for people eating in a way that makes noise. It's the equivalent of Cookie Monster's *omnomnomnomnom*. It's as if he were to say, "Whoever chows down on me has eternal life; whoever crunches and munches on me has eternal life." Like Basil the Blessed, Jesus is being all too intentional here: this is foolishness with a purpose. But to the crowd, this is just bizarre: it sounds like cannibalistic, vampiric nonsense. And, as we'll hear next week, many of them start to leave. They don't understand the treasure they're being offered: just as Jesus has his life, his energy, his being directly from God, we're to draw our life, our energy, our being from Jesus. The very life of God is flowing in Jesus' veins, and he freely offers to share that life with us. They can't grasp the wisdom in this foolishness.

There is something foolish about being a Christian. Certainly, in the eyes of the world, there ought to be something foolish about it. We worship an executed criminal and call him God's Word made flesh. There's something not quite respectable about this Christianity business. It's not that there's anything wrong with wisdom—the humanistic, reasonable kind of wisdom Solomon and the Ephesians are living by; the wisdom that says brush your teeth and pay your taxes and save up for retirement. That wisdom comes from God and it's important. But the gospel also has an edge of danger to it that takes us beyond the conventional wisdom of how to live a good life and be thoughtful and prudent. Following Jesus will carry us into a deeper wisdom, the kind that comes from confronting the deep paradoxes of suffering and violence and life and death.

C. S. Lewis once said that some religion tends towards the head and some towards the belly: some is about philosophy and ethics, and some is about mystery, mystic ceremonies and holy shrines. And one of the things that drew him to believe in Jesus was that Christianity was about *both*. It takes a devotee of pagan rites, he says, and tells them to embrace an enlightened universalistic ethic of the fellowship of all humanity. On the other hand, “it takes a twentieth-century academic snob like me,” he wrote, “and tells me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord.”¹ What he needed was some belly religion. When we follow Jesus, we do it with our whole selves—the head *and* the belly.

¹ “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 103. I think Lewis has a genuine insight here, though I can't endorse his glib and oversimplified dismissal of other religions, nor his racial stereotyping of “savages,” and have emended his quote pretty substantially. Lewis's weak points have become increasingly obvious to me with time (see Laura Miller's evenhanded criticism of Lewis), but he was influential on me in adolescence and young adulthood and I retain a lot of affection for his sacramental imagination and his deep love of God.

There's something irreducibly *odd*, even perhaps a little *embarrassing*, about what we do here, gathering every Sunday to crunch and munch on Jesus. And if we forget about that oddness, or try to ignore it, we're missing out on the fullness of what God is offering us.

Early Christians were seen as pretty *odd* in the culture around them. The culture of the Roman Empire prized literature, philosophy, science, and the arts. It was deeply wise in many ways. And yet it was also marked by profound cruelty and brutality. Early Christians refused to kill and be killed in the empire's wars. They refused to treat women and slaves as disposable. They refused to call Caesar a god. Many of them were ostracized for it. Some of them were even martyred. They were seen as weirdos, as fools.

How might we also look foolish if we choose Christ's wisdom over the world's? If we choose simplicity over acquisition and status, if we choose sustainable lives over a culture of frenetic achievement; if we dig in and cultivate real community instead of disposable relationships; if we give away our possessions and our money for the benefit of others; we might not always look wise and prudent if we're following Jesus. But there is a deeper wisdom to that adventure.

So today when you come to the table, come and be made foolish. Come and take this bread which is true food and this wine which is true drink, and become what you eat: the flesh and blood of Jesus, for the life of the world.