

Year B, Proper 15
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The Rev. Fred Devall

All over the nation and particularly in the south, we are eagerly awaiting the arrival of football season. It's a curious sport, one that involves great physical skill, immense training and preparation, good strategy, and of course violence. This shadow side of the sport takes a lifelong toll on those who play it, especially on the very few who are good enough to play professional football. Men are willing to risk their health to play a game. Most fans and casual spectators would say football players do it for the money. Clearly the high salaries are a motivator, but if you have ever heard an interview of the game's stars, you quickly realize their primary motivation is to become immortal. Their physical bodies may face a shorter lifespan, but to be remembered forever is their ultimate goal. This is achieved by being voted into the Hall of Fame.

Unlike football which requires a five year waiting period before entering the Hall of Fame, for us immortality can be both immediate and forever. According to Jesus, we can eat living bread and achieve an immortality that goes beyond human remembrance; we can become immortal in God's life. The multi-tense nature of our life in God is revealed through Jesus' use of the word abide. We will abide in Christ and He in us through the act of eating his body and drinking his blood.

To a person unfamiliar with our words of scripture and worship, we could appear to be cannibals. This was a charge leveled at early Christians. As one who is not a literalist and who understands the ritual, it's still a curious thing to contemplate ingesting "living bread". Beyond Jesus' self-reference, the only living bread I know of is sourdough. Interestingly there are sourdough starters that have been producing for hundreds of years. Sourdough as a leavening agent was the norm for millennia. One saves a bit of dough from the batch to be used for bread baking and it continues on to be used again. In this way it is "alive". Cold won't kill it but excessive heat will.ⁱ

Fr. Jeff reminded us last week of the importance of blood with respect to Jewish understanding. Blood equals life. To acknowledging their life in God as Creator and sustainer, the Jews observing a kosher diet will bleed out an animal before consuming it. Nobody told this to the Cajuns because blood sausage, also called boudin noir, and blood pudding ensured every bit of an animal was consumed and not wasted. In a roundabout sort of way using every bit of an animal reflects respect for a life given so that others may live.

There is an incredible scene in Stephen Ambrose's telling of the adventures of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in his book *Undaunted Courage*. As background, it was estimated that the men consumed 10,000 calories per day. Rowing heavy boats upstream and portaging everything around waterfalls will do that to a person. Unfortunately for them, food sources were inconsistent and not always obtainable. There were times on the expedition when they approached starvation. The incredible scene is his description of the men pouncing upon and

absolutely devouring some game that they were finally able to secure. So famished was the Corps of Discovery they did not bother to bleed or even cook the animals.

I use these perhaps overly graphic examples to raise our awareness of how these words may strike non-Christians today and how absolutely strange these words coming out of Jesus' mouth must have sounded to a Jewish audience.

Perhaps a more useful example is taken from our state flag. On a field of blue with the state moto of "Union, Justice, Confidence" beneath sits a mother brown pelican, drawing sustenance for her three younglings from her breast. We know now that she is plucking down to keep the babies warm, but the original legend held that the mother pelican was actually feeding her own flesh to sustain her offspring.

This is what Jesus does for us in his passion. After teaching us to pray for daily bread, Jesus then provides it. We receive a new teaching on common foods of bread and wine. Then Jesus attaches meaning to these agricultural staples through his suffering on the cross, wherein he gives up his body and blood for us. It is through this act, this atonement, that we are able to abide in God's life. Participating in the Eucharist is both gift and pledge. It is God's gift in that we have life in the right here and right now. Our life in God awaits us when we die, but we need not wait for death to receive life in God. The pledge is what we do with the gift; if we truly foster the *starter* that has been given us in the leavening agent that is Christ's body and blood, we will be transformed. God will be alive in us and we in God. Amen.

ⁱ Wikipedia, "Sourdough".