

## What Would Dr. Atkins Say?

John 6:51-58

Finally, after four weeks, we are coming near the end of our time in the sixth chapter of John. And finally, no pun intended, we are getting to the real meat of the story.

Jesus has been leading them slowly, carefully, to this point:

Give them bread, not simply to alleviate their hunger, but to

Get them thinking about who he is, and sure enough, they do; they make a connection

*You gave us bread, Moses gave our ancestors bread.*

Not quite the connection he was hoping for, so he gives them a hint:

*Moses didn't give them bread, God gave them bread.*

*It kept them alive in the wilderness, but eventually they died anyway.*

*But there's good news: God's giving you a new kind of bread now.*

*And this kind of bread will keep you alive forever.*

*Cool, they say, give us some of that bread.*

*I am that bread.*

*Hmmm...* they said, not quite as eager as they were before. And when he said that he was bread that had come from heaven, they started to shift uncomfortably in their seats.

Things really go sour this week as he goes even one step further – *the bread I give is my flesh. You have to eat it.*

*Ewww. Yuck. That sounds like cannibalism, Jesus. That's the kind of talk that got us sent away from the dinner table when we were twelve.*

And then he really goes for the jugular: you have to drink my blood.

And that's the end of it for most of them. It is too graphic. Too horrible. Too preposterous.

But how could they have expected this conversation to go anywhere else? All Jesus has done is taken his argument to its natural conclusion, gross as it sounds. He is bread. What do you do with bread? You don't put it on a shelf and use it to hold up your books. You don't clean your floors with it. You don't frame it and admire it on your wall. You don't put it in a little box and carry it around with you for a good luck charm. You don't become a fan of it or form a club based on it. You eat it! You put it in your mouth, chew it up, and swallow it! It's food. Not a tool or a decoration or a form of entertainment or a cleaning supply. It's food. And you eat food.

Jesus could have compared himself to anything. He used metaphors and similes all the time. I am the good shepherd. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. You all are like fruit. He used all kinds of things common in the world around them to describe himself and the kingdom and what the life of discipleship was like. Sheep and barns and vines and lamps and parties. So he might just as easily have compared himself to a hard drive, or Ford Focus, or a German Shepherd. But he didn't. He said he was bread. He was very specific about that. And he wasn't

just any old food – a bowl of split pea soup or a fig or a plate of nachos. He was bread. The bread of life.

You probably remember that low carb diets were all the rage about a decade ago. The Atkins diet. South Beach diet. We were told that, not only would we lose weight, but that we would actually be healthier if we cut out the starches – the potatoes and the pasta and the doughnuts and the corn and rice, and oh yes, the bread.

And yes, we probably could stand to cut out the doughnuts and the cakes and the cookies, or at least cut way, way back on them. We could probably stand to eat fewer pastas and cereals made with processed white flour. But bread? Good bread, not the Wonder bread kind of bread? Bread is the staff of life. God didn't give the Israelites broccoli in the wilderness, thank goodness. God gave them bread. Jesus didn't fight temptation by saying that 'man does not live by fried chicken alone (despite what some Southerners might think). Jesus didn't pray, Give us this day our daily bananas. Or cheese. Sadly, not even our daily chocolate. Give us this day our daily bread. Bread's importance even shows up in our vernacular: The wage-earner at your house isn't the peanut butter-winner, it's the bread winner. Whether it is made from wheat or rice or barley or potatoes, whether it is round, or long, or rectangular or flat, bread is the staple of our diet, and our existence. Maybe we can't live by bread alone, but we cannot live without bread.

Or maybe I should say, we cannot live without eating bread. A big slice of whole wheat bread won't do us a bit of good if all it does is just sit on our plates. You could collect cookbooks and devote yourself to mastering the art of bread making; go to EarthFare and buy rye flour and wheat berries and spend every Saturday morning baking the most incredible breads, fill your house up with that heavenly smell, but if you don't actually eat it, it's useless. Doesn't do you a bit of good. You have to break it off, take a bite, chew it, swallow it. If it is to nourish you, make you strong and healthy otherwise. It has to become a part of you.

Jesus said, *I am the living bread come down from heaven...and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* He's really pushing the envelope with that metaphor, isn't he? Maybe he's not talking cannibalism, but he's intentionally using words that evoke a visceral response, and he's doing it for a reason. He wants them to know, first and most basic, that he is the way to eternal life now. Things have changed and the focus is no longer on the law and sacrifices and all that. Jesus is the way.

But he also wants them to understand that there is no dabbling in Jesus. No Jesus snacks. Committing ourselves to Jesus means a regular, steady, daily diet of Jesus of Nazareth. There's no grabbing a quick bite of Jesus on the run between one event and another, squeezing him into our busy lives. Lifestyles. There's no filling up with junk food all week long and then expecting one good healthy meal on Sunday is going to do it for us. And just like you have to be careful and read the labels at the grocery store to see that there is a difference between whole grain products and their less nutritious counterparts, you have to be careful not to fill up on a diet of committee work and church activity, and believe that you are feeding on the body of Christ.

Jesus doesn't just fit into our lifestyle. Work, soccer, family, the gym, church. Being a disciple of Jesus, consuming Jesus becomes the very heart of life. It isn't the only thing, but it the most important thing. It is the staple of our diet, our existence.

So how do you know if you are getting a good enough diet of the bread of life, the body of Christ? Doctors and dieticians have long been telling us that you are what you eat. A healthy diet produces a healthy body, but a steady diet of chips and soft drinks and processed foods flavored with salt and fat, chances are pretty good that your body will take on the unhealthy characteristics of the food you're eating. Your food forms you, and transforms you.

If you are what you eat, then with a good, steady diet of Jesus you'll find that, bit by bit, little by little, your life is being transformed. You are becoming more and more like Jesus. You think like Jesus. You look at the world like Jesus. You love like Jesus. You have peace like Jesus. And most of all, you experience the steady companionship of God, just like Jesus did.

It's probably a good thing Jesus wasn't in sales. Intimating that cannibalism is the way to eternal life, at least to people who were more literal-minded than literary-minded, was a hard sell. They didn't buy it. And even though he didn't mean what they thought he meant, it was still an invitation to a feast: feasting on the Word. Feasting on his life. Feasting on his presence. Being nourished by him, not by the empty calories that the world offers. Jesus is the bread of life, and he invites all who trust in him to come and be fed.