

Good morning everyone. My name is Elliott May and I'm the Youth Ministry Director here at St. Columba's. It's a joy and an honor to be here with you this morning. I invite you to pray with me.

Holy God- may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege of taking 9 of our high school students on a youth pilgrimage to Delaware.

Throughout the week, we had the chance to do all sorts of interesting things- we kayaked, we volunteered at a local farm, we even went on something called 'a treetop adventure,' which, for those who haven't recently done that sort of thing, meant getting strapped into a climbing harness and clambering across rope bridges to lots of elevated platforms and riding ziplines. It was an amazing trip, and one that I had personally been looking forward to for a long time. Especially after this long pandemic stretch of physical distance and zoom-style youth activities, it was so much fun to be able to be in the presence of one another as a group, and for us all to make memories through shared experience.

And as I said, we did a lot of fun and exciting activities over the course of the week, but one of my favorite things we did together was something a bit simpler- we cooked together.

Here's how it worked- we took our group of teenagers to the grocery store, gave them a budget and a time limit, and then asked them, as a group, to plan and cook and serve a meal for everyone on the team, including the adult leaders. We had divided the kids into two smaller groups, so we took turns doing this task over the course of a couple nights with each one of the smaller groups, about four or five kids cooking each night.

And I have to say, while in the moment it felt like a bit of a risk to turn over dinner duties to a group of 15 year olds, they all did an incredible job, and it was a really special experience to watch. Both groups really took the time to think about all that goes into feeding a large group; they worked together to pick their dishes, to plan out how much food they needed to prepare, and worked to use their budget well.

But beyond the logistics of preparing a meal for a bunch of people, it was especially beautiful to watch the group come together around the table once it was ready. After all the prepping, the cooking, the serving, finally, we sat down and experienced that sense of fellowship that only comes from sharing a special meal together.

And that experience got me thinking about today's gospel passage. Here Jesus offers a strange invitation- a call to absorb God, to take God into yourself, not in an abstract, spiritual sense, but tangibly, physically, viscerally.

For some of us, these verses about the body and blood of Christ may feel strange, or cause discomfort. What in the world is Jesus talking about? Eating flesh, drinking blood? What is this?

Well, if you think any of that when you hear these verses, the text indicates that you're not alone. Jesus' listeners had similar questions. Verse six quotes the group as asking, "how can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Maybe there has been a misunderstanding. But instead of retreating, Jesus

doubles down in response and in the process, leaves us with some difficult questions.

In this exchange, there are echoes of an even more ancient Biblical story. In the Book of Exodus, we read the great saga of the Israelites as they escape from Egypt and begin the long search for the promised land. At one point, the narrative describes a dire moment in their history. They've been lost in the wilderness for a long time and think they are looking pretty bad. Eventually, things get desperate, supplies are running low, and the people turn to Moses and the complaints begin. "At least we had food in Egypt," they said. "Now, we're out here in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to eat, with nowhere to turn. We wish we had just died in Egypt."

And so Moses takes this and turns to God, who promises to send bread from heaven for the people. This is certainly a welcome development, but as often happens in the Bible, further problems emerge later on down the road- the people get tired of the bread, they get tired of having to gather it each day instead of stockpiling it. In short, they get tired of the dependence on God that it requires.

The author Frederick Buechner once observed that “we don’t live by bread alone, but we also don’t live long without it. To eat is to acknowledge our dependence- both on food and on each other.” This is the joy we experienced on pilgrimage a couple weeks ago- in preparing food for one another, slowing down long enough to appreciate that the food we were used to consuming everyday was coming from somewhere specific, from people who made it just for us. For those couple of evenings, we were dependent on one another for our daily sustenance.

My wife Molly and I have a little toddler named Lucy, who will turn two years old in a couple of months. Lucy is our first child, so with each new stage that she enters, it feels like a whole new world for us as parents. I have already learned so much from spending time with this tiny little person, but one of the most interesting things that I’ve noticed is that in certain moments, she exhibits behaviors just like adults. One of these behaviors is this seemingly innate resistance to the idea of dependence or limited-ness. Here’s what I mean- even though she can’t yet put on her own clothes or change her own diaper, she likes to act as though she is

completely independent. She marches around without a backward glance to make sure we are with her, poking things, grabbing whatever catches her eye, in general pursuing whatever is interesting. She also has no sense of danger at all. What happens if you touch the blue fire on the stove? What happens if you shake this delicate thing? And on and on, while her mom and I follow behind and try to keep her from doing anything too dangerous.

And I have to say that it seems to me that in some sense this is a very basic human sensibility. Sure, most of us learn not to touch the stove after awhile, but we still resist the idea that we are dependent, that we have limits. We don't like to think that there are places that we will always come up short, ways in which we will always be dependent on others.

This is part of what Jesus is pointing at in today's gospel. Jesus draws a line for his listeners between the old story about Moses and the Israelites and bread from heaven, which comes everyday but disappears by tomorrow. Jesus is saying, **I am** that bread from heaven, sent by God to sustain you for the journey, except for one big difference. This bread is

eternal. This bread doesn't wither and disappear, and neither do those who eat it.

We see from this passage that God is not content to remain at a safe distance from humanity, offering abstracted concepts about love and mercy. God steps into the dust and the dirt human life and invites us to the table, to gather as one community and center ourselves again and again around this central story of our faith. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood ***abide in me***, and I in them, Jesus says. It's part of what is unique and potentially even uncomfortable to hearers about this passage- God insists on the tangible, even when the metaphorical may feel more comfortable.

On that youth pilgrimage a couple weeks ago, as we talked about different ideas in faith, we kept coming back to this one phrase over and over again, especially in the prep for those big group dinners- *what we have, we share. All are welcome here.* Today's gospel tells us that what God has, God shares- namely, God's own self.

At the table of God, we acknowledge our dependence, on God and one another. At the table of God, we find new life, and a hope for something imperishable. May we be attentive to that call. Amen.