

**The Reverend Christiane Dutton
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
August 19, 2012**

“Wonderful Words of Life”

John 6:51-58 | *Read the scripture online <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=211976552>*

Do you ever tear pages out of magazines like in the dentist’s waiting room or at home, tips, recipes? In my folder there is this article I cut out of “Reformed World” about 20 years ago. It is one of the few I pull out from time to time and read over again. I just love it. It’s on the top of today’s bulletin:

“Words which are good for thought, once understood, are no longer repeated. Repetition does not add anything, because the comprehension of their meaning exhausts what they have to say.

Words which are good for the body are always repeated, because they are loved: a poem, a prayer, a song. No hermeneutics exhausts their beauty and goodness. Every repetition is the repetition of a pleasure, in a new experience.

When I understand words which are good for thought, my mind gets a knowledge of their meaning. But my body remains untouched; I do not become a brother of the one who wrote them.

When I taste and feel the grace of the words which are good for the body, my body becomes different, and I become a brother of the one who wrote them. Between us there emerges a pia conspiratio, a common intention of love. Community emerges.”
--Rubem A. Alves

Can you relate to that? Do you know such words that are good for the body? Would anybody care to say one aloud? Actually, one of them for me is John 1:14, *and the word became flesh*. Maybe because we read it on Christmas?

Well, I have to tell you when I read the gospel text for this Sunday, those were definitely NOT good words for the body. They sit in my craw. They are hard to swallow. These words have created so many problems for the church, starting right here in John. And I was very tempted not to use the passage and choose a text I could handle. I checked the commentaries; they have a hard time also.

John Calvin is convinced Jesus is not referring to the Last Supper here; others just strenuously argue that that’s what it’s all about.

And then there was one word in the text that jumped out. John uses two different words for eating. One, *fagein*, that’s just simply eating. The other, *trogein*, that’s much coarser: biting; it’s the word you would use for cattle chewing the cud, and if you have seen that, you know what a slow, meditative process that is. And this thinking about munching the word; bread; flesh brought to mind this reading by Rubem Alves about words that are good for the body.



Alves is a Brazilian, theologian, philosopher, psychoanalyst, Presbyterian. He is considered one of the beginners of Liberation Theology. I looked over his bibliography and there are titles like “The Eater of Words,” and “Words for Eating, Base Communities.”

And I thought maybe if I can't get my mind around this passage from John, maybe I'll check it out if there could be words good for the body.

(Now an aside to my husband: “Don, you are a systematic theologian and there might be a moment where you just want to shut your ears, but on the other hand you never go on a journey without taking a book of poetry along. Anybody who loves poems knows they are words that are good for the body.”)

When we look at this passage, and we have in our ears, *and the word became flesh* when we look at verse 5: *I am the Living Bread that came down from heaven ... and the bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh*, then these words come together: Jesus Christ, the word, the bread, the living bread, the flesh. They are all ways in which Jesus meets us, all ways in which he enters our lives.

In a sense, this could be just as well a Christmas text as one for the Lord's Supper. It is about the incarnation, about Jesus coming so close, Jesus becoming “our own flesh and blood.” Isn't that what we call our nearest and dearest?

Is there any way to make more clear how deeply God has entered into our lives than to say in Jesus Christ, God became flesh?

And when we say flesh many of us (maybe most) know how fragile flesh is, how vulnerable, how prone to illness, to addiction, to helplessness, how close to death. And Jesus has entered to be right in the flesh with us.

Many of you, I think, love the song “How Great Thou Art”: *And when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in.*

Take it in? How do we take it in, incorporate it into our bodies? Jesus says, “By eating.”

Just as the only way bread feeds us, is when we eat it—not when we just look at it or talk about it—so the Living Bread, the Word, the flesh, we need to eat it to take it in.

Have you ever thought about how often we use eating terminology for taking in words, things, people, ideas? “They are hard to swallow” or “We swallow them hook, line and sinker” or “We have to chew on them” or “We bite off more than we can chew”; “We are fed up” or “Have it up to here”; “We can't stomach something or someone.” And if we make a great presentation, we might say, “They ate it up!”

Bread, words, people, we take them in and they abide in us. Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.” They become “flesh of our own flesh.” We become one.



We eat the bread, we eat the flesh, we eat the words, they enter us, they change us, they are distinct and together they are more than the sum of their parts.

I need to read you a short piece from R. Alves' book, *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*:

My father-in-law was born in Germany. He moved to Brazil after the First World War. He was the son of a Seventh-Day Adventist pastor. As you know, members of this religious group are very strict about their eating habits. They do not eat pork and blood, and don't drink liquor, tea, or coffee. My father-in-law, even though he was no longer a believer, could not forget the prohibition words which had been written in his body. And he even had an extra prohibition, which was his alone: he could not eat brain. Even though he had never tried brain before, the fact was that he did not like it ... One day he was invited to a dinner. He was the guest of honor. And he was very pleased as he saw that the main dish was breaded cauliflower. He must have thought that the hostess was an expert in the rules of etiquette: she must have known about his almost vegetarian habits. He ate and had more. Delicious ... at the end of the dinner, the alchemy of assimilation having already begun, and body and soul satisfied with the food, he gave a compliment, "The breaded cauliflower was divine ..."

"Oh! No!" said the hostess. "It is not breaded cauliflower, it is breaded brain ..."

Poor lady! She could never have imagined the kind of storm which an innocent word in the mouth could produce in the body ... My father-in-law, forgetting all rules of propriety, jumped off his chair, rushed to the bath room, and vomited everything ...

How can we account for what happened?

The "thing": was it not delicious? Had not the body tasted and approved it? What physical or chemical changes could have occurred after the word "brain" was said? None. My father-in-law knew this in his head. And yet his body did not agree. What had been good to eat before the word, ceased to be after the word was heard. What strange entity is this, which has the power to bring to nothing the hard realities of physics and chemistry? One single word triggered the digestive storm. It was not the taste, it was not the smell, it was one single word.

My thoughts dance and jump from this disastrous dinner to medieval sacramental theology. In describing what took place in the Eucharist they used the word transubstantiation. Protestant theologians could not understand this concept because, for them, words have no magical power, they are only raw material for thinking. I suspect that this is due to the fact that their fathers-in-law never experienced the embarrassment of an indigestion provoked by one single word. These two situations: are they not rigorously alike? Bread and wine: the basic "stuff" for the meal. Then a word is pronounced. Nothing changes. Under the scrutiny of objective criteria of knowledge, bread remains bread and wine remains wine. As medieval theologians said, the "accidents" remain the same. And yet they affirmed that by the power of the word an imperceptible change took place: a new "substance" is there, in the place of the old: the Body and the Blood of Christ.



If you want to see a movie that speaks very nicely about this power of food and words and community, rent “Babette’s Feast” and watch it.

I said before that one of the words John uses for eating is more like chewing the cud, a meditative eating, it is a very intimate, a very personal thing this taking in of Jesus.

Nobody else can eat for you. You have to eat it for yourself. This eating is very personal, very individual, but then as we abide in him and Christ in us; it becomes very corporate because now we are one with all the others who abide in him.

Alves speaks of the *pia conspiratio*, a common intention of love. Community emerges. I told you that Alves was one of the founders of Liberation Theology and I want to just read you one paragraph from the “Gospel of Solentiname:”

Solentiname was such a community, where bread and words were shared, where every Sunday instead of a sermon, there was a Bible Study. Ernesto Cardinale wrote “The commentaries of the campesinos are usually of greater profundity than that of many theologians, but of a simplicity like that of the Gospel itself. This is not surprising: The Gospel or “Good News” (to the poor) was written for them, and by people like them.”

Here is an example from a study of John:

TOMAS: “Bread is food. Animals live only on food. People live on another food too: the bread of love, or the words of these meetings that we’re having here, I mean the Eucharist.”

MANUEL: “Christ says that food isn’t enough for human life. Just like animals can’t live without food, people can’t be truly human without the word of God. Without it, a person isn’t human like other people. He’s an animal, a wolf ...”

ELVIS: “To teach us that, that we need the word of God for life, Jesus had gone into the wilderness to fast.”

[and Marcelino]: “The word of God gives us bread too. Because in a community some might have bread and others might not. And if there’s love, we share it and we all eat. If there isn’t any love, even though there’s a lot of food, people will be hungry because a few people will hoard the food.”

(That’s all I’ll say about this, just keep that in mind when we later sing “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ.”)

I don’t think I have given you much clarification about this passage from John, but maybe there has been a word or words you can hang on to, in which you can abide for a while, or on which you can chew around a bit.

Amen.

