

“Chomping down’ his flesh;
‘Swallowing down’ his blood.”

Every three years, when today’s reading from John’s Gospel comes around, I remember an incident that happened, one summer during Seminary, when I was working as a hospital chaplain.

One evening, I was working an all-night shift. And as I was doing my rounds, and introducing myself to the patients assigned to me, I encountered one patient in particular.

He was a fairly young boy, and he was accompanied by his parents. And the one thing I wanted my visit to convey to them was that I was there for them, and they shouldn’t hesitate to reach out to me for *any* reason. And so, this is what I said to them: “Listen, if *anything* comes up, give me a call, because...” — and I’m quoting myself, because what I said next is burned into my memory — “...because it’s not as if I have anything better to do.”

As soon as those words were out of my mouth, I knew I had blown that pastoral opportunity. Because, although I had intended to communicate that there was no concern or issue too small for them not to call me, what I had in effect said was that “I’m having a slow evening, and any distraction, even a call from you, would be great.”

In fact, they *didn’t* call me. But I’m sure we’ve all been in situations where we began with the best of intentions, but ended up simply putting our foot in our mouth.

That's why, whenever I hear today's Gospel reading, I always wonder if, at the end of that particular day, if Jesus grabbed the nearest disciple, and desperately asked him,

“Please tell me I didn't say those words! Please tell me I didn't tell those people that they had to eat my flesh and drink my blood. Please, for the love of God, tell me I didn't say any of that!”

And I wonder that, because as bad as that passage might sound to our ears, believe me when I tell you that it sounded so much worse to Jesus' audience. For the way that John's Gospel describes it, Jesus was using extremely vulgar language to get his point across.

According to John — and here, I'm going back to the original Hebrew and/or Aramaic — Jesus said that a person must literally “chomp down” his flesh and “swallow down” his blood; language usually reserved to describe the eating frenzy of animals, and especially of a predator consuming its prey. Wow!

And so, the bottom line for Jesus? At best, what he was suggesting was scandalous. And whether or not Jesus actually had any regrets about what he said, we still have to deal with it.

So, the first thing we need to establish is what Jesus had in mind when he said those words. I don't think there's any doubt that Jesus had the Sacrament of Holy Communion in mind, because his words — especially as they've been rendered into English — really do sound like the Eucharistic words of institution where Jesus says, “Take, eat, this is my body ... drink this, all of you, for this is my blood...”

But having said that, where does that leave us? Well, a couple of thoughts come to mind.

First of all, let's consider the vulgar language in the original text, the words about “chomping down” and “swallowing down.” By and large, I imagine that a lot

of people approach the altar rail in a spirit of reverence, or maybe even awe; and usually with a solemn, hushed dignity.

But I think Jesus is suggesting something else entirely. In fact, the language he uses suggests that we approach the altar rail like a predator approaching its prey; that the bread and wine are things we *must* have; that they're things we're desperate for; that they're things we dare not allow to escape us; because they're things we *NEED!*

Now, why would that ever be the case? Well, that brings me to the second thing I wanted to say. Nearly 700 years ago, the German medieval mystic Meister Eckhart (d. 1328) once wrote: "The [ordinary] food we take [in] is changed into us, but the spiritual food [which] we receive (*i.e.* , the BREAD and WINE of the Eucharist) *changes us into itself.*"

I think that's an amazing notion, that, somehow, and in some way — even if just a little bit — when we "take and eat" the bread and wine, that *we are changed* to become more like Jesus.

Obviously, this adds a whole new layer of meaning to old saying: "You are what you eat." Because, in the Eucharist, we are not just adding a little bit of Jesus to go along with what's left of the coffee and sausage biscuit we gulped down on the way to church. It is not one substance alongside another in our digestive tracts, co-existing in darkness like Jonah in the whale.

Rather, and according to Eckhart, in that sacramental moment, we are enveloped, and we are changed more and more into the likeness of Christ himself. In that moment, we enjoy an intimacy with God that overshadows any other relationship that we might have. For God comes to dwell within us in a new way, and in doing so, takes us to dwell within him. *And we are changed.*

Several years ago, Peggy and I were helping our youngest daughter, Emily, get settled in Berkeley, California, where she was to undertake her graduate and post-graduate studies in environmental engineering. One morning, at breakfast,

Emily shared how several of her friends back in Kansas had said to her, “Don’t let the experience change you, Emily. Don’t stop being the Emily we all know and love.”

And she told us that she found statements like that bothersome. And the way she explained it was, “I’m just going off to graduate school. I’m always *going* to be who I always *have* been.”

Peggy and I didn’t think about it much at the time, but later on, when we were heading to the airport, we talked about that conversation. And we realized that we disagreed with Em. In fact, we were convinced that Emily would indeed change, because *life changes us*. Life, and life’s circumstances, change us all. And sometimes those changes are dramatic, and sometimes those changes are subtle. But change we all will. And the fact is, the only things that don’t change are things that aren’t alive. Dead things don’t change.

I had a classmate in seminary who, from the start, made it clear to us that he didn’t want to be there. He had wanted to go to a different seminary — one that was more in line with his own personal theology — but his bishop wanted him to be exposed to different theologies and spiritualities, and thought it would be good for him. But he would have none of it. He remained rigid and unmoved throughout the three years we were all there. And whenever I think about him, I become more certain that when people are like him — when people try to dig in their heels, and try as hard as they can to remain unchanged by the experiences of life — that every time they do that, they die just a little bit.

Because life *is* going to change us; we can’t control that. But what we can hope to control is *how* it’s going to change us; and, to some extent, *what* will change within us. That is, we can choose, as life progresses, whether we will be changed more and more into the image and likeness of Christ, or into some other image and likeness.

And if it's the image of Christ that we hope to adopt — if being imitators of Christ is something we hope to do and be — then a good first step in that direction will be to “take and eat” and “take and drink” of the bread and wine of Eucharist — to “chomp down” and “swallow down” — and *as often as possible*.

And to do so as if your very life depended on it, because, in the end, it just might.

Amen.