

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
Nate Irvine, Young Adult & Campus Minister
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Michelle Zauner is a woman of many talents. On the one hand, she's known for being the frontwoman of an amazing indie rock band called *Japanese Breakfast*, who I'm so glad I got the chance to see at Summerfest last year. In addition to that, she's also the author of a New York Times best selling memoir called *Crying In H-Mart* that was released a few years ago (2021).

The book is a deeply beautiful and intimate description of Michelle's relationship with her Korean mother, particularly after they learned that her mother was diagnosed with an aggressive form of pancreatic cancer that took her mother in just four months.¹ And the title, *Crying In H-Mart*, perfectly describes this painful journey of loss. To say H-Mart is an Asian grocery store or supermarket chain is a poor choice of words, in the same way that saying Katie Ledecky is someone who swims pretty good. It severely punches below its weight. H-Mart is a supermarket, but it's so much more than that. By Michelle's description, "Inside an H-Mart complex, there will be some kind of food court, an appliance shop, and a pharmacy. Usually, there's a beauty counter where you can buy Korean makeup and skin-care products," and perhaps even a French adjacent bakery.² She calls it a "holy place" where people go to be joined to their roots and heritage, to find things that can't be found anywhere else, so they can remain connected to something fundamentally important to them.³ As she says, "we're all searching for a piece of home, or a piece of ourselves" in H-Mart.⁴ Sure, it could be a way of nourishing a craving for a particular dish, but it's so much more than that - it's also a way of nourishing a deeper truth, and an integral identity.

H-Mart was the place that Michelle went to after her mother passed to be connected to just that. In a piece she wrote for the New Yorker that served as the launchpad for her book, Michelle writes, "Within the past five years, I lost both my aunt and mother to cancer. So, when I go to H-Mart, I'm not just on the hunt for cuttlefish and three bunches of scallions for a buck; I'm searching for their memory. I'm collecting the evidence that the Korean half of my identity didn't die when they did."

And as she walked the aisles, she would often lose it, as you would imagine.

I think we likely can all relate to this in some way. Whether it's the death of a friend or partner, the end of an important relationship, a move that uproots us from one city to another where everything is new and just different. Starting over without what we've left behind is hard. It may be something small - how eating deep dish pizza or seeing someone wear Cubs gear reminds

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<https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/literary/michelle-zauner-interview-crying-in-h-mart#:~:text=In%202014%2C%20Michelle%20Zauner's%20mother,later%2C%20she%20had%20passed%20away.>

² <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/crying-in-h-mart>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

me of Chicago. Or it could be deeper than that. I think of my friend who lost her partner, Joe, who I've mentioned before. Whenever I go to their house, I'm usually drawn by all the photos I see of him hanging all over the place. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, I'll notice his hat or jacket still hanging by the front door, and it's as if he's saying hello and welcoming me in. Or when my grandfather passed earlier this year, I found myself pouring over printed photographs hung on a display board I don't think I'd ever seen, and saving them on my phone. I also found myself asking to keep his jewelry box despite the fact - as you can clearly tell - I don't wear any jewelry. My brothers and I saved some of his cufflinks, which have yet to see the light of day on my part. These are all ways we try to remain connected to things that deeply matter to who we are.

And I think this need to nourish a deeper truth, and an integral identity is at the heart of what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel reading. Today we find ourselves in the 4th of 5 lectionary readings all devoted to John chapter 6, and in it, Jesus is doing his hardest to communicate a deeper truth. It all began several weeks ago when he fed at least 5,000 people (it was likely much more) all on five loaves of bread and two fish. But as Ginger Barfield explains, the crowd didn't really understand what he was up to. They chase Jesus to Capernaum because they're wowed by the sign, but what Jesus did wasn't only about bread or eating.⁵ As she points out, as a result the rest of the chapter is spent by Jesus trying to drive at this deeper truth.

So just what *is* Jesus getting at here?

On the one hand, some scholars would point out that Jesus, or at least John through Jesus, is driving at the importance of the Eucharist. And I think that is true at least at some level. If you give even a cursory reading of John 6, it's hard to not think of the Eucharist. Even back when Jesus did the mass feeding, scholars would point out how the text reads. In verse 11, after the crowd sits down, it says, "Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks..."⁶ Sound familiar? And of course, in our section today, Jesus is literally talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. That seems pretty on the nose. Furthermore, scholars would point out how John is the only gospel that doesn't include a story wherein Jesus institutes the eucharist on the night he was betrayed.⁷ Instead, John, even though he does devote roughly a quarter of his gospel just to that one night, details the foot washing scene we commemorate each Holy Week. Because of this omission, some scholars would point to John 6 as a sort of equivalent.

And while the Eucharist is central to our worship and formation, and I believe John is driving at that, and the first Christians reading John would have picked up on that as well, I think something else (deeper?) is happening, at the same time.

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<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-20-2/commentary-on-john-651-58>

⁶ Sparks, O. Benjamin. "John 6:51-58: Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009, pg 356, 358.

⁷ Ibid.

I think Jesus is inviting us to consider how, to use William H. Willimon's translation, we are to "consume" Jesus, and that he nourishes us and feeds us in the most fundamental, deep, and liberating of ways.⁸ That we are invited to "eat", and that as we do, we experience a profound abiding with him. That in order to nourish a deeper truth and an integral identity in us, Jesus tells us that it will take some consistent active engagement on our part that isn't too unlike having a meal. "Participation" is what one scholar called it.⁹ That this wonderful, freeing, life with Christ is one that will constantly invite us to nourishment, because Jesus deeply desires to do just that for us.

And then last, there's this part where Jesus' hearers begin to "dispute" or fight among themselves in response to what Jesus is saying. And I think we would do well to ask why this might be happening. And I quite like what Susan Hylen¹⁰ offers on this. On the one hand, she points out that many scholars will say Jesus hearers are balking at what Jesus is saying on a literal level - that what Jesus is talking about sounds an awful lot like cannibalism, and that the thought of drinking a living thing's blood was strictly forbidden in Levitical law. And I think that surely could be true. But Susan thinks we ought to also think about it from a narrative point of view.

See earlier in this chapter, after the feeding of the 5,000, the crowd asks Jesus to perform another sign similar to how, in Exodus, Yahweh fed his people by sending manna from heaven. And Jesus runs with this comparison, and decides to talk about himself in light of that story, saying, "Yes, exactly! I am that bread that comes down from heaven." But if you remember that story from Exodus, you'll know that the people grumble and complain about the way God chose to feed them in the wilderness, and John seems to be constructing the same narrative throughout this story.

So if it is true that John is trying to connect the dots from his story back to the wilderness in Exodus, and if it is true that we are then identified as those who balk and grumble at Jesus when all he's trying to do is nourish us, the question we need to sit with I think is this: when are we likely to grumble and reject the ways that Jesus wants to feed us? How might we reflect and reconsider an openness to the sustaining, life-giving work of the Spirit in our lives?

Because God's table is prepared, and is open to all, to receive the blessings of God so freely given.

Amen.

⁸ Willimon, William H. "John 6:51-58: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009, pg 359.

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<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-20-2/commentary-on-john-651-58>

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<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-21-2/commentary-on-john-656-69-3>

