

“Flesh and Blood”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Psalm 111

John 6:51-58

Last week in my sermon, I said that while Christians may believe the way of Christ is better than other paths, that does not mean that no one else can know or find God. The God we worship is not so rigid or narrow-minded. But I was taken aback when we sang our closing hymn, “I Am the Bread of Life.” If you sang with us last week, did you notice the middle verse? As we were singing, it struck me that this was the exact opposite of what I was trying to say: “Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink of his blood, you shall not have life within you.” Why did I choose that hymn?

Then this week I saw the gospel lesson for today, which has those same exact words. And I thought, “Oh no. Now I have to preach on this.” So here we are. How can anyone make sense of a passage that says, “Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink of his blood, you shall not have life within you?” Are you sure this is Christianity, and not some cannibalistic cult? Maybe it’s better not to really listen to the words in our hymns, not to mention the Bible.

A pastor friend of mine* tells the story of one Sunday when he presided over communion in his congregation. He was standing at the table with a white linen tablecloth, silver chalices and plates, and solemnly pronouncing the familiar words of institution: “Take and eat. This is my body, broken for you; this is my blood, shed for you.” The congregation was listening intently when a little girl said in a loud voice, “Ew, yuk!” Suddenly *everyone* was horrified, as though the pastor had splattered blood all over the table...

What could Jesus have possibly meant when he said things like, “Whoever eats me will live because of me?”

First of all, we have to keep in mind that the man who wrote these words of Jesus in the gospel of John, was not trying to report the actual words of Jesus. Most likely John wrote 70 years after Jesus, and he was more concerned with the deeper meaning of what Jesus said, than the exact words. And in the gospel of John, there are many layers of deep meaning to all the stories and sayings.

We also have to keep in mind that eating human flesh or drinking any kind of blood was strictly forbidden in Jewish law. It was considered disgusting and even evil by people of faith. No wonder John reported that “because of this many of (Jesus’) disciples turned back and no longer went about with him” (vs. 66). Who could follow a man who tells people to eat his flesh and drink his blood?

In those days, Jewish people believed that a person’s life was in the blood. And this made sense to people who were not familiar with science or biology, because if a

person loses enough blood, you can see the life draining out of him, and he dies. So blood contains life, and therefore blood belongs to God, the source of all life. That's why you should never drink it.

But remember how the gospel of John starts? It says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." (1:1, 14). Flesh, in the gospel of John, is not just skin and muscles and organs. Flesh represents our full humanity, our complete selves. In Jesus Christ, God became completely and thoroughly human. So when Jesus said, drink my blood, eat my flesh, he was saying we are to take his life, his full humanity, his whole self into ourselves, into the very center of our being.

Why would we do something like that? William Barclay writes** it's like a book that you have on your shelf, but have never read. It may be an amazing book that can change your life, but as long as it stays on the shelf, it is outside of you, external to you, and has no effect on you. If you've ever been in a book club where people don't read the books, you may know what I'm talking about. People may tell you about the book, but it doesn't have any real effect on you unless you read it yourself. But maybe one day you pick up this amazing book and actually read it. You are thrilled and fascinated and moved. The story sticks to you, the great lines stay in your memory. It changes how you see the world. Once the book was outside of you, on a shelf. Now it's inside and it feeds your mind and your spirit. And that's how it is with any great experience in life. It remains outside of us, and has no effect on us, until we take it in.

Barclay writes that's how it is with Jesus. If he is just a figure in an unread book, he is outside us. But if he enters into our hearts, we can feed on the life and strength he gives to us. When Jesus said we must drink his blood, he is saying, "You have to stop thinking of me as a subject for theological debate, and take me into yourself, and you come into me. Then you will have real life." That is what Jesus meant when he spoke about us abiding in him and himself abiding in us.**

God wants to be in us, and have an effect on our whole selves, our bodies and minds, feelings and fears, hopes, dreams, concerns, everything.

John's gospel is very different from the other three gospels. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, all talk of eating flesh and drinking blood is linked to Jesus' death. In these three gospel stories, Jesus gathered his disciples for their last supper together before he was crucified. And he told them to take the bread and eat it, saying "This is my body." Then he took a cup and gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many..." And then it says immediately after this, they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus would be arrested (Matt. 26:26-30). So according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, when we gather for communion and eat bread and drink the cup, we call it flesh and blood thinking of Jesus death on the cross, offering up his life, pouring it out, demonstrating his love for us and the world.

But in the gospel of John, the message of eating and drinking is not connected to Jesus' death.*** John does have a story of the last supper, on the night Jesus was

betrayed. But there is no talk of eating flesh or drinking blood at that supper. Instead Jesus washed the disciples' feet and spoke to them of being a servant. In John, the message of eating and drinking comes in the middle of Jesus' life, right after he fed 5,000 people in the wilderness and then said, "I am the bread of life." (6:35). And in this same chapter Jesus called himself the *living* bread. Verse 51 says, "I am the *living* bread that came down from heaven." Jesus did not just offer his life as he faced death. He did that. But he also offered his life throughout his ministry, while he was still very much alive.

John wrote, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." And Jesus said, "The bread I give for the life of the world is my flesh" (vs. 51). Jesus offers us his humanity and abundant life with God now, while we are alive. In John 10:10 Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." The life that Jesus offers is not something we wait to die for. It's not something we postpone to the future. It is a promise in the present.***

Sometimes it sounds like Jesus is talking about what happens after we die. But even when he talks about eternal life, it's not only the life to come, but also a quality of life here and now. The bread comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. And when Jesus said, "Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of his blood, you have no life in you," (vs. 53) he's talking about life now. To refuse to take Jesus in is like refusing life, because Jesus calls us to truly live, to get away from petty selfishness and greed, away from self-promotion and protection, away from narrow-minded interests, to seek the truth, to embrace what is right and good, to love fully. And that is life.

And so this morning I invite you to take Jesus into your heart. That may sound evangelistic. But the evangelicals have a few things going for them... not the message that Jesus is the only way, but the message that Jesus can change you, and bring new life, if you let him in, let him have an effect on you. Now don't worry, I'm not going to make you come forward and kneel for an altar call. But I am going to give you a minute to talk to Jesus. And then I invite you in the next few days to listen to his voice, to chew on what he says and digest it, and let him touch your deepest self, and guide you gently into life, for that's what he came for.

So right now, take a minute or two to pray silently. Tell Jesus what's on your heart, and invite him in. If you've done this before, do it again. It's something we do over and over. Let us pray.

* Martin Copenhaver, as quoted by David Lose, at www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-12-b-meeting-the-carnal-god/.

** Barklay, William, *The Gospel of John, Volume 1*, The Daily Bible Study Series, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975, pages 224-225.

*** credit to Karoline Lewis, "A 'Living' Bread," at www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3667.