

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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And Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it and said "Do this in remembrance of me." "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life."

Here we are, gathered for worship and doing exactly what Jesus tells us to do. Most of us are very familiar with the language of the Holy Eucharist. We know that what we will receive in the bread and wine consecrated at this table is the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. But there are some who hear the words about eating Christ's Body and drinking Christ's Blood and get repulsed by the whole idea.

I once knew a devout and faithful parishioner who was widowed and lonely ... until she met a widower and found true love again. He loved everything about her, including her Episcopal church, and he tried to come with her on Sundays and share her joy, but he just couldn't abide all that talk about drinking blood. He thought it was disgusting.

"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you," says Jesus. Sometime ago I celebrated the Holy Eucharist in a lovely garden where the aromas of sage and thyme rose round about us and bird song filled the air. The congregation, including a baby owl, sat in a circle around a rustic altar table. As I began the prayer of consecration, a little girl named Sally toddled toward me. I held up the loaf of bread and broke it. "This is my Body, given for you," I said, and Sally came right up beside me, fascinated by the action at the Eucharistic table. Then I raised the chalice, "This is my blood," I said, and Sally screwed up her face, shouted "E-e-e-ugh" and ran to the safety of her mother's arms.

"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you," says Jesus. Don't these words make us somewhat uncomfortable too? And can't we readily understand why early Christians were persecuted as cannibals?

When Jesus says that he is the bread of life who comes down from heaven, he is using an understandable figure of speech, saying that he is like manna from heaven, like food that sustains life, that we would starve without him, that we would not ever be hungry but always be satisfied if we ate this bread. But when he says, "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink," Jesus uses an image that disturbs us. He says, I am speaking of my flesh; I am referring to my blood - my flesh that grew for nine months inside my mother's flesh, the blood that coursed through my veins in the manger and the red, salty, sticky blood that ran down the finger I cut in Joseph's carpenter shop. My flesh and blood are me, he says. They are what I came to give for the life of the world. My flesh pierced by a spear and my blood spilling down beneath the crown of thorns. It is this blood that feeds you.

No matter how we understand the Holy Communion, the idea of eating flesh and blood can't help but strike us as primitive.

But Jesus says nothing without a reason, and he certainly has no qualms about making us uncomfortable. He speaks of his blood deliberately because he wants us to come face to face with his incarnation, the central truth of the Christian faith. He wants us to know that God was born into a real body, that God became present in a person like us, and that the real presence of God, the incarnation of God, continues still today. He wants to teach us that God is made known not just in an idea but in a person, and he teaches that lesson through a meal.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus taught through eating and drinking, through conviviality and nurture. He began at a wedding in Cana of Galilee where he changed water into wine so that the guests could toast the bride and

groom. When he wanted to teach us that everybody is welcome in God's Kingdom, he sat down at a table and ate dinner with tax collectors and sinners. When he wanted to show us the wideness of God's mercy, he told the story of a father who cooked a fatted calf to celebrate the return of his prodigal son. After Jesus' resurrection, when he wanted to open the eyes of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus broke bread with them. When he wanted to show his disciples that he wasn't a ghost, he asked them "Have you anything here to eat?" and when the disciples gave him a piece of broiled fish, he ate it to show them that he was not just a hope and a dream, but God-with-them who shared their bread and wine, their fish and vegetables, and that even though he had died and risen, he would be with them always.

So when Jesus wants to show *us* that he will be with *us* always, he does it at a supper, with eating and drinking at a common table. There were other ways to do it, I suppose. Jesus could have stayed on earth without ascending into heaven. He could have established Jerusalem as his headquarters and commanded annual pilgrimages there, like the hajj in Mecca this week. He could have instituted a ceremonial touching of the hem of his garment to receive divine power. But he didn't. Instead he chose a meal, a way that we would gather together to take him inside us, to incorporate him into our lives, a way he could be one with us, flesh of our flesh.

Little Sally was right to run from that garden altar. "Drink my blood" is a fearful command. Jesus said it that way to tell us that it is no small or ordinary thing that we do at the Lord's table. He uses vivid language to keep us from pretending that the Holy Communion is just a memorial meal like Thanksgiving where we tell stories of Squanto and the Pilgrims. The command to "Drink my blood" shouts at us that when we receive the cup we are receiving JESUS CHRIST, that when we leave this table we are Christ-bearers as surely as Mary his mother was. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life," he says. It is not polite nuanced language; it gives a picture of a body broken and torn. And that is exactly what is going on here: Jesus Christ given for you, body broken and blood spilled for you - because God loves you. When we receive Holy Communion, we are not just performing a ritual, we are indeed receiving Jesus, the Body of Christ into our bodies.

Jesus gives us his flesh, his very self, to be incarnated - *in carne*, in meat, enfleshed in us so that we may be his body and begin to make God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

If you believe that Christ dwells within you, then your life will change. I know that this is true because when I am in a supermarket line with my clerical collar on, I am far more patient with the poky lady in the checkout line than I am when I am not wearing clothes that identify me as a Christian. If I know that Christ dwells in me, I need to live the way he calls me to live. And so do all of you.

If Christ dwells within you, how can you use his name to curse?

If Christ dwells within you, how can you take him into a bed of adultery?

If Christ dwells within you, how can you file a dishonest tax return and make others pay what you really owe?

If Christ dwells within you, how can you begrudge adequate health care for the poor?

If Christ dwells within you - oh, but that's the point, isn't it - because Christ does dwell within you - and that makes all the difference.