

Flesh and Blood
Sermon on John 6:51-58 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, August 20, 2006

Shortly before my ordination I received a telephone call from a panicked young couple that I was preparing for marriage. “We heard you might be moving,” said the groom-to-be. “That would be news to me,” I thought, then realized that this might in fact be how ministers learned of their new appointments, namely through the grapevine. When I thought about it later, I realized that for some time it had been announced that I was to be ordained at Custer Road UMC in Plano, and when word got around, this couple feared it meant that I was being assigned there. That’s one way rumors get started.

As far as rumors go, that one was pretty harmless. The early church didn’t have such an easy time of it. In the first and second centuries, Christianity amounted to neither Church nor Christendom but small, fledgling groups of Jesus’ followers scattered throughout the Mediterranean world ruled by the Roman Empire. Christians of this day and time tended to be poor and poorly educated; they were artisans and craftspeople and slaves. They didn’t go to Gothic-inspired chapels or to lunch after church at the club. That was enough to mark them out as suspicious among the cultured elite. And then the rumors began to circulate.

It was noted that these “Christians” as they were known gathered together once a week to celebrate what they called a “love feast.” It was not open to everyone, but only to those who belonged to their curious society and had been initiated in its ways through baptism. They called one another “brother” and “sister”—even spouses called each other that. It wasn’t long before people began to put two and two together and concluded that Christian worship must be some “orgiastic celebration in which Christians ate and drank to excess, put the lights out, and vented their lusts in indiscriminate and even incestuous unions.”

Adding to the scandal was the practice of Communion, which the cultured elite regarded as cannibalism. “Since Christians spoke of being nourished by the body and blood of Christ, and since they also spoke of him as a little child, some came to the conclusion that, as an initiation rite, Christians concealed a newborn [baby] in a loaf of bread, and then ordered [a new initiate] to cut the loaf. When this was done, they all joined in eating the warm flesh of the infant.”¹

I wish I could say that the rumor of cannibalism has disappeared in the centuries between then and now, but I can't. There are many skeptics and despisers of the Church who to this day insist that when Christians—including you and me—come to Communion to receive the body and blood of Christ in bread and grape juice we are engaging in cannibalism.² Where do they get such a crazy idea? We might ask ourselves, and the answer is right before us. We need to look no farther than Jesus' words in John 6:51 where Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

The group of Jewish people who heard Jesus say this was stunned and amazed. They were so shocked that they disputed—indeed they fought violently—among themselves as to what this could mean. Quite rightly they asked, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (6:52). Rather than offering an explanation and clearing up any possible misunderstandings, Jesus simply goes on, saying: “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (6:53-56).

¹ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Vol. 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984) 49-50.

² See, e.g. “Christian Cannibals” by Jim Walker at <http://www.nobeliefs.com/communion/communion.htm>, though be warned that the content and some of the images may be disturbing.

Talk about your public relations nightmare. This clearly is not the Bible of family values, the G-rated Bible, involving no violence or violent images. In the space of three sentences in English, Jesus three times talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, flesh that is “true food” and blood that is “true drink.” After that kind of piling on, how could your average person, indeed your average Christian, not begin to wonder about the charge of cannibalism?

And so the question we must confront is, What does Jesus mean when he says “eat my flesh and drink my blood”? It is a question the Church has wrestled with, argued about, and split over for hundreds of years, and I will not pretend to offer *the* or even *a* definitive answer. Time forbids my going to any lengths to explain the nuanced and deeply theological arguments that have arisen over the course of the history of the Church. Even to summarize the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation or the Anglican (and thus Methodist) understanding of spiritual eating requires the kind of attention to detail that a brief sermon such as this does not permit.

Suffice it to say that the fact that ‘drink his blood’ is coupled with ‘eat his flesh,’ in the words of C. K. Barrett, “unmistakably points to the eucharist.”³ In John’s Gospel, this is the setting for the Last Supper; here is where we get the language of Jesus giving himself for the sake of the world. In the phrases “eat my flesh” and “drink my blood” we hear echoes of the more familiar “This is my body” and “This is my blood,” the words of institution found in the other Gospels (Mt. 26:26-28; Mk. 14:22-24; Lk. 22:19-20). And though there are echoes, as Raymond Brown points out, here we encounter “a new vocabulary”⁴; Jesus in John uses words like eat, feed, drink, flesh, blood. To be certain, the words have about them “a certain crudeness and reality,” but these words also prevent us from “overspiritualizing” Jesus’ humanity.⁵

³ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1958) 247.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1966) 291. ⁵ *Ibid.*, 285, 291.

In Hebrew thought, “flesh and blood” is a way of speaking about the whole person; it is an insistence upon the corporeality, the bodiliness of human existence. What is flesh and blood is human, a human being. In Jesus we know that the Word of God became flesh and lived among us (1:14). That Word-become-flesh is the bread of life given for the world (6:51) because Jesus is himself the bread of heaven. His flesh then is living bread, the bread of life. The repeated command of Jesus to “eat my flesh” and “drink my blood” is a reminder that “it is the whole incarnate life ... of the incarnate Son of God which is the lifegiving food.”⁶

These verses with their command to eat Jesus’ flesh and drink Jesus’ blood are accompanied by a promise. (John Wesley insisted that Jesus’ commands are always accompanied by a promise.) Jesus promises that the one who eats and drinks of him will have eternal life and will be raised on the last day (6:54). By feeding on Jesus, and partaking in him, we will have life both here and now and in the life to come, for “Those who eat [his] flesh and drink [his] blood abide in [Christ] and [Christ] in them” (6:54). And thus to have eternal life means to be in close communion with Christ, to share in that relationship that Jesus the Son shares with God the Father.

We should not forget what the Eucharist is truly about. In one sense, the Eucharist calls us to remember the sacrifice of atonement that Jesus made on our behalf, a sacrifice by which our sins are forgiven. But this is not the angry act of a vengeful God, satisfied only by the sacrifice of an innocent human. This is the loving act of a God who is both just and merciful, who offered himself in offering his Son. And moreover, the Eucharist calls us not only to remembrance but also to celebration. Jesus’ death is not the tragic end to a heroic tale, for his death is only one aspect of the story. What we celebrate in the Eucharist is the surprising act of God in raising Jesus from the dead. What we celebrate in the Eucharist is the resurrection of

⁶ Barrett, 247.

Jesus and the promise of new life that is entailed therein. At Communion we remember Good Friday, but we celebrate Easter. That is why this is a banquet, a feast, an occasion for rejoicing and happiness: because in Jesus a new reality dawns and we receive eternal life.

And so when we come to the table to receive Communion, we eat not simply bread nor drink simply juice, but the body and blood of Christ. How they become this, we may never discern. But they are God's good gifts to us, gifts that nourish and feed us. They are gifts that, when we receive them, allow us to share in the very life of God. In the Eucharist Jesus offers us the gift of himself, the flesh and blood of Christ.