

“I am telling you the truth,” Jesus says, both to the crowd gathered around him in Capernaum and to you who are sitting in the pews of Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran. “I am telling you the truth: if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in yourselves. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.... For my flesh is the real food; my blood is the real drink.”

These words caused the crowd in Capernaum to shrink back because what Jesus is speaking about has always been regarded as an abomination by the law and the prophets.

Do we shrink back because it doesn't square with our reason, it doesn't fit our sensibilities? If we're honest, isn't *it just a little gross*, sounding closer to cannibalism than it does Christianity? Think about it for a moment. When is the last time you really paid close attention to the words of Jesus we remember at each celebration of the Lord's Supper?

Rev Martin Copenhaver, one of the Church's more eloquent preachers and pastors, describes what happened at the communion table. The congregation was silent, even somber, as the pastor began carefully to read the words of institution in a solemn tone. And, “when I repeated Jesus' familiar words, ‘This is my body, broken for you; this is my blood, shed for you’ a small girl suddenly said in a loud voice, ‘Ew, yuk!’ ... The congregation looked horrified,” he continues, “as if someone had splattered blood all over the altar — which, in effect, is just what the little girl had done with her exclamation.”

Jesus is the bread of life. John 6 carries the words, so that we can finally encounter the heart of it all. In these verses we begin to recognize just what is at stake for Jesus, just how much we are worth to him. In these verses, he offers to us his very own flesh and blood, the flesh which will be stretched upon the cross for our sake, the blood which will flow freely from his hands, feet, and side, for our sake.

Jesus makes himself far too plain. In this passage, Jesus gets all too gritty, even base, in his imagery in order to confront us with the claim and promise of the carnal God, the God who becomes incarnate, who takes on flesh, becomes just like us, so that we may one day be like God.

For in Jesus, the Word made flesh in the sacrament, the Word given physical, visible form once again, we meet the God who will be satisfied with nothing less than our whole selves. This is why Jesus speaks of giving us his flesh and blood, you see, *“flesh and blood” is a Hebrew idiom which refers to the whole person*, hearts, minds, spirit, feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, everything. In Jesus, you see, the whole of God meets us to love, redeem, and sustain the whole of who we are, good, bad, and ugly.

God comes for our whole selves.



In one sense, this sums up all of John's testimony to Christ. Throughout the Fourth Gospel we encounter some of the most familiar images describing the relationship of Jesus and those who believe in him:

- Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep;
- he is the vine and we are the branches;
- he abides in God and we abide in him.

“In this passage, however,” as Copenhaver continues, “language is pressed to the limits to express the indissoluble union and inextricable participation of one life in another. For those who receive Jesus, the whole Jesus, his life clings to their bones and courses through their veins. He can no more be taken from the believer's life than last Tuesday's breakfast can be plucked from one's body.”

This is the promise which God makes to us in the Sacraments: to be one with us and for us forever, to stick with us and even *in* us no matter what.

Each and every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper God comes to us once again to offer us a promise made so concrete and solid so that we can touch and feel, taste and eat it. Here, again, in these common physical elements, we have God's promise that God not only cares about our births and deaths, our marriages and our jobs, our successes and our failures. God has joined God's own self to each event and to us through Christ, the Word made flesh has been given for us.

**Jesus extends this interpretation. He indicates that the life he gives is “eternal”: “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever” (John 6:51). The phrase “live forever” (Greek: *zesei eis ton aiona*) is a variation of John's more common words for the gift Jesus provides, eternal life. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus asserts that he is the bringer of eternal life for those who trust in him.**

This “life” Jesus brings is not limited to a future heavenly existence after death. It includes a present; now. Many modern Christians make this mistake in reading John's Gospel. We are familiar with modern theological assertions that followers of Jesus go to heaven.

John has something different in mind with the phrase “eternal life.” This life is available to believers in the present and not only in the future. Jesus says “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life” (John 6:54) and “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life” (John 6:47). The verbs are present tense. The life Jesus brings begins during the life of the believer and during Jesus' own incarnate existence on earth.

In calling this life “eternal,” John communicates that the life Jesus offers is qualitatively different from regular human life. “Eternal” (or “forever”) is a characteristic that belongs only to the



divine: “The Lord sits enthroned as king forever” (Psalm 29:10); “The counsel of the Lord stands forever” (Psalm 32:11). It is God and God’s initiatives that properly possess this quality.

Those who trust in Jesus and “have eternal life” participate in this divine life even now. When Jesus later says, “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10), he is saying something similar. Those who abide with him share in the creative force of the God who brought all things into being. This same life is embodied in Jesus (John 1:3-4).

John’s Gospel is distinctive in that it records no moment of the institution of the Lord’s Supper (compare with Matthew 26:26-29). At Jesus’ last meal, the foot washing takes center stage (John 13:1-11). But these words in John 6 identify a future gift of eating and drinking Jesus’ flesh and blood, which certainly would have evoked the eucharist for early Christian readers.

Looking at the Bread statements collectively in parallel may help you and me to see their relationship to verse 31.

He gave them bread from heaven to eat. (John 6:31) past

My father gives you the true bread from heaven. (John 6:32) present

The bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. (John 6:51) future

By interpreting the scripture verse in these ways, John suggests that Jesus’ giving of his flesh and blood is a restatement of the gift of bread from heaven (manna). The future gift of bread, which Christian readers understand as the eucharist, is also manna.

This Old Testament manna imagery is often discarded in our modern celebration of the eucharist in favor of sacrificial language. Drawing on John’s understanding eucharistic prayers emphasizes the story of God’s enduring care for Israel in the exodus story, and invite listeners to understand themselves as the recipients of this care. Those who receive Jesus’ body and blood might imagine themselves as those same wilderness travelers, following God in the pillar of cloud and fire, and feeding on manna, which was all that sustained them. John’s theological imagination opens up rich possibilities for growth in understanding of what it means to participate in this meal.

