

In our Gospel lesson today, we hear about Jesus teaching in the Synagogue in Capernaum. Our Gospel today is part 4 of a 5-part series of readings from John. It begins with Jesus feeding a crowd of 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish. The next day, the crowd follows Jesus to Capernaum wanting more food. Jesus basically tells them, 'You don't need regular bread. You need the bread of heaven. You need the bread of life.'

As Dcn. Becky put it last week, Jesus is telling them that they need a different slice from a different kind of bread. And then he says, 'By the way, that's me. I am the bread of life. I am the true bread from heaven.'

But then we get to today's Gospel lesson, and Jesus throws the people for a loop. He tells them, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."¹ And "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." And he adds, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day."²

Eat flesh. Drink blood. I can't begin to tell you how shocking this would have been in Jesus' world: 'You need to eat my flesh and drink my blood.'

To the Jews, eating human flesh was incredibly offensive. Any Jew who simply touched a corpse would be made unclean. It's a part of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. (It's window #2 on North side 2nd window from the back.) A man is beaten by robbers and left for dead. Jesus tells the story of the priest and the Levite who both pass by the man lying beaten up in the road. The priest and the Levite in the window are the ones who are fading off into the distance because they haven't stopped to render aid to the beaten man. They pass by because if he were dead, and if they even touched him, they couldn't do their jobs for weeks. And if even touching a corpse is this big of a no-no, imagine what eating flesh would be. It'd be a million times worse.

And drinking blood would also have been unthinkable. Jews go to great lengths to avoid even eating animal blood, even today. Kosher meat is meat that has the blood drained out of it during the slaughtering process. The Old Testament was clear: Thou shalt not eat the blood with the flesh.³

Yet Jesus tells them, "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you."

On top of that, the words used for 'eat' and 'drink' are pretty graphic and rather coarse.

Jesus doesn't even 'nibble my flesh and sip my blood.' He begins with a normal word for eating. But then he switches to a stronger word that's rarely used in the New Testament. In fact, 4 of the 6 times it's used are in today's Gospel lesson.

¹ John 6:51

² John 6:53-54

³ See Gen 9:4, or Lev 17:14, or Deut 12:23

Jesus says, you need to crunch my flesh, or chomp on my flesh.

Also, Jesus is using a word for drinking that often applies to wild parties. It's like saying you need to chug my blood.

The use of these words suggests that Jesus is talking about real eating and drinking. And before we start jumping ahead and spiritualizing what Jesus is saying, let's spend just a moment thinking about eating flesh and drinking blood in our culture.

Think of the movies. People rarely eat other people in the movies. And when the movies do show cannibalism, it usually happens in one of two genres.

#1. There are Zombie movies: *Dawn of the Dead*, or *Night of the Living Dead*: the dead come out of their graves to eat the the living.

Or #2, there are Survival movies: a wagon train gets snowed in in the pass, or a plane crashes in the mountains, and after a few weeks of hunger, your buddy is starting to look real tasty.

Then there's drinking blood in movies. It's pretty rare. The only time you really see it is in Vampire movies.

But none of these are positive examples. Nobody wants to emulate them. You don't see these movies and say, "Gosh, eating flesh looks like fun. I wish I could have been part of the Donner Party." Nobody I know wants their kid to grow up to be just like Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Cannibalism is just not very attractive in our culture.

But this still raises the question: What is Jesus trying to say? "Eat my flesh. Drink my blood." Surely, he's not suggesting cannibalism?

An important clue comes out of the Jewish understanding of blood. Blood was thought to be life. That's why Jews wouldn't eat it. It's too special and too mystical.

And this view makes a certain amount of sense. If you bleed too much, you lose life. Today if you lose blood, doctors try to put blood back in through a transfusion.

To drink blood therefore is to drink life. To drink of Jesus' blood is to partake of Jesus' life. Jesus' life is taken into our bodies and made part of us. "Those who drink my blood have eternal life."

Partaking of Jesus' flesh is also understandable. Back in his time, after an animal sacrifice, the flesh of the sacrificed animal was often eaten. This happened in both the Jewish Temple and pagan temples. The pagans during Jesus' time even believed that the flesh of the sacrificed animal mystically became a part of the body of the god it was sacrificed to. To eat the flesh of an animal that had been sacrificed was to eat a part of a god. And they believed firmly, "You are what you eat." Therefore, to eat the flesh of the Lamb of God, sacrificed on the cross,

is to partake of that sacrifice, and find oneness with God. "Those who eat my flesh abide in me, and I in them."

So, in some sense, it IS a little like the vampire and zombie movies. Vampires and zombies are creatures that are dead, and yet need to feed on the living in order to stay alive.

There's a scene in the classic zombie movie, *Return of the Living Dead*, where two guys are in the process of becoming zombies. They look and feel really bad, so they call 911. The paramedics come and check them out. Their body temperature is 72°—room temperature. Their blood pressure is zero. Their pulse is zero. On the outside they're walking and talking—and really worried. But on the inside they're dead.

Now I don't want to push this analogy too far. But there is a real sense that many times we're like those zombies. Walking and talking on the outside. But dead on the inside. We need to be charged and recharged. We need to be filled and refilled. And the only one who can do it is God. "Eat my flesh, drink my blood, and be filled with my life."

That's one of the truly great and grace-filled things about Holy Communion. God sets the table and offers himself to us in the bread and in the wine. And by partaking of it, we can be spiritually filled and fed.

Another great thing about Holy Communion is a matter of location. God is everywhere. You can meet God anywhere. There are an infinite number of places where God can be.

But there are some special places where God promises to show up. There are places where God promises to be especially present. And one of these is in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. And that's also a truly great and grace-filled thing about the gift of Holy Communion.

But this gift requires a response from us. We have to come to the table. And we have to accept the gift.

In this way, communion is a lot like a great song. You can go buy the CD that has the song on it. Or, you can download the mp3 to your hard drive. You can also read all about the song. You can find out who wrote the song and when. You can buy other music by the same artist. But there's only one way to really know the song. You have to listen to it. You have to push play, and you have to listen to it.

And if you really want to know the song, you have to listen to it again. And again. And again. That's the only way that the song will ever become a part of you.

Jesus is the same way. It's possible to keep him tucked away somewhere. It's possible to know he's around, like a CD on a shelf or an mp3 file on a hard drive. It's possible to read a lot about him. But the only way that he will ever become a part of you is if you take him

into your very being, to bring him inside yourself and inside your life, to make him a part of you. And to do it again. And again. And again.

"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." But, Jesus says, "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and," just as importantly, "I abide in them."

Jesus is the true bread which has come down from heaven to give life to the world. Lord, give us this bread always.