

## THE BODY AND THE BLOOD

**TEXT:** John 6:51-59

Does this passage from John disturb you just a little? Do these words seem to imply a literal charge to us to practice cannibalism? Can these words actually mean what they seem to be saying to us? What does this instruction mean as we consider our sacrament of Communion?

A couple of months ago I asked you to suggest subjects or texts that you would like me to address in future sermons. One of those requests was to talk about Holy Communion, and what we as United Methodists believe about this sacrament. I decided to start with the reading from the Gospel of John because it challenges us with words that sometimes frighten, sometimes confuse, and always startle us.

So let's start with some understanding about the writer who brought these words to his gospel. John, the beloved disciple, wrote this book long after the first three Gospels were created. His perspective was greatly influenced by his association with the Greeks and with their philosophies and their use of symbolism. We see a bit of this in our text today. By eating of the "sacrament", that is a sacrificial animal, there was the belief that the people were thought to be infused with divine life. This symbolism, therefore, came from the mystery religions of the Greek world.

In the words we read today, John is doing what he so often does. He is not giving, or trying to give, the actual words of Jesus. He has been thinking for seventy years of what Jesus said; and now, led by the Holy Spirit, he is giving the *inner significance* of his words. It is not the words that he reports; that would merely have been a feat of memory. It is the essential meaning of the words; that is the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So, first let's talk about bread. Usually when we think of bread in the Biblical sense, we think of communion or manna from heaven. But bread was important in the daily lives of the people of Jesus' day. It was made at home by wives and daughters, and usually made fresh each day. Bread was always given to those setting out on a long journey, and was offered to strangers who passed through the land. The Old Testament tells us that when God's people were disobedient, God warned them that their supply of daily bread would be taken away as punishment.

God provided bread for the Israelite people as they were wandering through the desert of Sinai on the way from Egypt to the promised land. This bread *manna* was called the “bread from heaven”, the literal Hebrew meaning being “What is this?”

The Jews throughout history have shared meals of bread and wine. These meals were both a celebration of good times in the present and a celebration of the day when God would defeat their enemies and send their Messiah. John’s Gospel tells us in earlier verses that Jesus’ followers believed that he was God’s chosen Messiah and the true bread from heaven that gives life. In The Lord’s Prayer, the only material thing for which we ask is to be given each day our daily bread. Bread is the symbol of the basic necessity for life.

But Jesus talked about more than bread. He knew that bread and wine were important to the lives of the people and he recognized the symbolism that would come from using these elements as symbols for understanding how they should relate to him.

Just as bread was the symbol of the basic necessity for life, wine was a symbol of hospitality, the sharing of a cup creating a unity between the participants. When Jesus performed his first miracle at Cana, he showed the importance of wine to the community of fellowship. By providing the best wine at the end of the festivities, he helped us to understand that the very best for us will be at the last when we will have the wine of fellowship with him.

Jesus said: “He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, dwells in me, and I in him.” What an amazing statement! It is interesting to note that John does not relate the story of the Last Supper, as this event was still a year away. But it appears that his telling of this story is his way of preparing us for communion – it is his way of helping us understand the meaning of the Body and the Blood so that we can come to the communion table prepared for what we are doing here.

When Jesus says that we are to eat his body and drink his blood, he is saying that he is going to give his life for those who believe. He was telling us to feed our hearts and souls and minds on his humanity, and to revitalize our lives with his life until we are filled with the life of God. Jesus as food and drink sustains physical life, so Jesus, the real spiritual food and drink, sustains his followers spiritually

So, this brings us to the subject of Holy Communion and what it means for us today. What John was telling us was that if we want life, we must come and sit at the Lord's table, where we eat that broken bread and drink that poured-out wine which somehow, in the grace of God, brings us into contact with the love and life of Jesus Christ.

So let's start with the various words we use for this sacrament. There are some who refer to this as *Eucharist*, a word from the Greek meaning to give thanks. This term helps us remember that at the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup, Jesus gave thanks to God for God's saving work in the world.

We often hear the words *Lord's Supper*, drawing on Paul's description of the meal, where he takes the church to task for its abuse of the Supper. It seems that the Corinthian church had allowed divisions to occur and inequity to grow between members of the community, some arriving early and eating and drinking in such a way that those who arrived later went hungry. For Paul, such action betrayed the intent of the Lord's Supper as an act of the whole body of Christ, which is the church. He emphasized that this is Christ's meal – the Lord's Supper – to which we are all invited. We are not the host of the meal; Jesus Christ is our host.

When we call the meal *Eucharist*, we remember the thanksgiving Jesus offered to God as he gathered his disciples for a meal. When we call the holy meal the *Lord's Supper*, we focus on the One who invites us to the meal. When we call the holy meal *Holy Communion*, we name the result of our gathering at the table. We are brought into and sustained in a relationship with God and neighbor.

There are basically four "camps", four ways of interpreting just what happens at the Communion Table. There are those who believe in *Transubstantiation*, believing that the elements, the bread and the wine, actually change into the body and blood of Jesus. This is the belief of the Roman Catholic Church.

*Consubstantiation* is a modification of *Transubstantiation*, which is the belief that the body and blood of Jesus are present always after consecration – in, with and under the elements. This is the practice in the Lutheran Church.

*Symbolism* says the elements are representative of the body and blood of Jesus – with no saving effect in partaking of them. They are visual aids. This is a view held by most members of the Baptist Church.

So, what do we United Methodists believe? What happens when we come to the Communion table? Through the sharing of the bread and cup, we experience in Holy Communion, perhaps at the most basic level, the presence of God in Christ and fellowship with our neighbors. Bread and wine (and for we Methodists more often grape juice) are brought to the Lord's table, thanksgiving is given, bread is broken and the wine is poured, and the community shares in the holy meal. It is an experience of our relatedness to God and to one another through Jesus Christ. This experience brings to our awareness the steadfast love, mercy and grace of God, even when we cannot explain how this happens.

For John Wesley, the experience of God's love through Holy Communion is an ordinary means of grace. That is, while God is not limited in the ways God reaches out to us, Holy Communion and other acts such as baptism, has been the means throughout the church's history by which people of God have experienced this grace. Although it may be tempting to believe that this experience is something God imposes on us, John Wesley was always careful to remind the Methodist people that this experience of grace depended on God's gift and our response in faith. In other words, as God continues to invite us to the feast, our participation in the feast depends on our willingness to accept the invitation.

Wesley believed that the benefits of participating in the Lord's Supper are two-fold: our sins are forgiven and we are strengthened to live the Christian life.

Just a word or two about "Open Communion" as practiced in our United Methodist Churches. Throughout most of the church's life and history, baptism has served as the rite of entrance to the Lord's Supper. This restriction grew out of the church's understanding that formation and instruction in the Christian life was required before a person was permitted to join in the table fellowship. However, Wesley observed that baptism did not guarantee the holiness of those who gathered for Communion. He saw the Lord's Supper as a converting ordinance and he invited all who sought to live the new life in Christ to come to the Lord's table. United Methodists today practice open Communion, All who desire to live and lead a Christian life,

regardless of age, ability, or denomination, are invited to the Lord's table for the holy meal. We are reminded that Jesus shared meals with sinners as well as with the righteous. We also are reminded that the table to which we are invited does not belong to a particular congregation or denomination, but to Jesus Christ. It is Christ who invites us to share the meal with him.

There are a variety of ways in which Communion is received. Sometimes the congregation remains seated as trays of bread and small cups are passed from person to person. Some churches have kneeling rails at the chancel area where participants are served the bread and cup. Traditionally our congregation comes forward, are handed a piece of bread, which is then dipped into the chalice of wine or grape juice. When we process to the altar we physically respond to God's invitation to the feast. We hear the invitation "Come, let us eat" and we come.

There is no prescribed ritual as each individual comes forward to be served. Traditionally, the hands are cupped as the bread is given, and an appropriate response might be "Amen" or "Praise God" or simply a quiet nod. We have a kneeling bench here at the front for any who might wish to pause for a moment of silent reflection after receiving the elements. I hope some of you will use it.

I would suggest that Communion is a celebration that recalls the Last Supper as a holy meal that provides spiritual food for Christians, and is a Sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. It is a sign of God's free gift of salvation. When we receive the Sacrament we share more deeply in our redemption and we join with all members of the faith community in thanksgiving, sacrifice and remembrance. In Thanksgiving we thank God for God's creation of the world in all its beauty, God's everlasting goodness and blessing of redemption which allows us to experience both the beauty of the world and the joy of heavenly life.

In Sacrifice, Jesus gave himself to the Apostles and to us as sacrificial food in the form of bread and wine. When we participate in the sacrament of Communion we are made holier by the power of his sacrifice, we participate in Christ's sacrifice and we are strengthened as members of the faith community.

In remembrance we are doing as Christ directed when he said, "Do this in remembrance of me". As we follow the words of John to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus, we are remembering the sacrifice Jesus made for us. The bread is bread, and it will always be bread. It

cannot be changed. The wine is always just what it is, and there is no miracle that takes place there. You don't get the body of Christ by going through a ritual. Communion is more than a ritual. A seminary professor once taught that in the Lord's Supper it is bread in your mouth, but it is Christ in your heart. There is a spiritual blessing that comes to observing the Lord's Supper.

The celebration of Holy Communion fulfills the command that Jesus made through the words of John. The Body and the Blood of the risen Christ give spiritual life and strength to those who receive it. It gives us courage to carry on God's work in the world; it gives us help to live the life God wants for us; it gives us inspiration to know the will of God in our lives; it gives us a deeper understanding of the holy mystery of Christ's presence in our lives; it gives us encouragement to love others and strengthen the faith community, and it give us Grace to overcome temptation and avoid sin. Above all, it gives us joy and peace of heart, knowing that Christ lives in us and will one day bring us to God's heavenly kingdom. Amen.