

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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## **Blood Brother**

John 6:53

So, how long has it been since you were accused of being a cannibal? Speaking for myself, it has been awhile. For our Christian forebears, however, it was an everyday occurrence. The accusations began not long after the birth of the church, not long after the gospels became well known, not long after Paul sat down to pen a letter or two to churches far away. Not long after these things, suspicion began to grow about these Christians. And why wouldn't they grow? This early band of faithful would talk about meeting in private to hold "love feasts" where they ate the flesh of Christ and drank his blood. An accusation of cannibalism does not seem so far-fetched.

As we read from John's gospel, chapter 6, it doesn't seem far-fetched either. Taken at face value we would have to admit that when Jesus says, "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," even our own stomachs may take a turn or two. What is Jesus telling us here?

We do not believe that the bread we chew in communion is Christ's real flesh. Nor do we believe that the juice we sip is Christ's real blood. On the other hand, I cannot tell you how many children I have known over the years who have referred, excitedly, to Communion Sundays by proclaiming, "It's Snack Sunday!" Now surely, surely, we don't believe that either. Communion is not a time to devour flesh and it is not a time to have a snack. So what is it? What do we believe?

One hint of what communion is lies at the beginning of our chapter in John. It is the story of Jesus feeding the crowds with only 5 loaves of bread and two fish. On the surface, it was clearly never going to be enough to satisfy the 10,000 gathered but, once blessed, broken and shared, it was enough and even had abundance left over. So while our bread and drink come to us in miniature, they show us again how Christ can use what seems scarce in our lives and make it more than enough. Another hint lies in today's passage itself. The people remind Jesus of the manna God gave the Israelites in the wilderness. Manna was this substance that showed up on the ground each morning, enough to feed the people that day. Again, to outsiders it might not have looked like much but to this group of escaping slaves it was just the bounty they needed to reach the Promised Land. Continuous sustenance, the kind that can stay with us when we are wandering in the wilderness, this too is what communion is.

As you know, communion is also so many other things. It is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, sort of an hors d'oeuvres to the fulfillment of God's promises. It is a new Passover, when we sign onto a relationship with God that measures its success on Christ's faithfulness and not our own. It is a time to worship with the saints. It is a celebration of Christ as we wait for his return. It is a call to be a disciple. It is a visible symbol of Christ in the world. During any one Communion Sunday, our time together may be any one or all of these things to each of us participating. So the question is: Can't this be enough? With all of these layers of meaning, do we really have to have the flesh and the blood? Can't we have communion that isn't so graphic?

Scholars have postulated elaborate responses to this question and many of those explanations and arguments could be laid before us but the only way I can speak to this faith struggle is to tell you about two people I know. They are David and Beth and I once, years ago, served the church they attended. They were dating when I met them and then they were married. Not many months of marriage had passed before they found out the exciting news that they were expecting a child. They were ecstatic. They made plans and dreamed dreams for this child to come. They attended a service at the church that included communion each week and so, each week, I would see their smiling faces as they walked together to the front to take the bread, dip it into the cup and eat it as they prayed. A few months into the pregnancy their doctors found problems in the pregnancy. Beth and David were told that their baby would be born with a myriad of ailments and, at most, would live a few hours. The doctors told them to go home and consider aborting the child while the pregnancy was still in its early stages. That week I saw them again, coming forward together, their eyes wet with tears. They took the bread, dipped it into the cup and ate it as they prayed. They debated what to do and, eventually made the very difficult decision to keep the baby and continue the pregnancy. As Beth's stomach grew bigger, she fielded many painful moments: well wishes from strangers and nosy questions from neighbors. In the midst of it all I still saw them, each and every Sunday night, walking together to the front with faces etched with pain. They took the bread, dipped it into the cup and swallowed it as they prayed. When their son was born he lived but a few hours and then he died, as they'd known he would. And the very next Sunday, they came forward and ate and drank again.

There are many things this story is *not* about. This is not a story about abortion, its pros and cons. It is not a story about a happy ending. They knew their child would not live. They did not take communion so that he would live. They took it so that *they* would. They came down that aisle, time after time after time, for many reasons. They came so that they could believe again that God can take what is lacking—their faith, their hope, their joy—and make it abundantly enough. They came to get just enough manna to see them through the wilderness of that day. They came for abundance. They came for sustaining manna. But they also came to eat and drink Christ. They came to take something of him into themselves. They did not do it to empower or glorify death. They came because death and darkness was around every corner. Their eating and drinking could seem graphic to an outsider but that is because their lives were graphic. Communion deals in life and death because life and death is where we find ourselves.

You may not find yourself in such a stark situation as Beth and David did or, perhaps, you do. Whatever our situations, each of us may look healthy and glowing on the outside but we come to eat and drink Christ because death and darkness are all around. We eat, praying for abundance out of our scarcity. We drink, seeking the manna that will take us out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land. We swallow and digest, committing again to be people of life; people who are not empty, no matter our situation. We eat so we can finally be well fed. Amen.