

Call-off the Cannibals!
[Text -John 6:30-35; 49-55]

Pastor Dave Shackle
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The sixth chapter of *John* contains some of the most bizarre words attributed to Jesus. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.” Those *are* weird words - Jesus comparing to himself to some kind of heavenly manna that can bring Eternal Life to all who partake. And it gets even weirder: “The bread that I will give for the life of the world, is my flesh!” And then, it gets graphically gruesome: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you...for my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink!” Now, as unappetizing as that may sound to some of us, imagine how repulsive those words would be to the people of the Jewish faith. It’s not kosher for them to eat the flesh of an *animal*, unless the blood has been properly drained; yet Jesus says “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.”

Of course for you and me today, the harshness of these words is softened because of the longstanding practice of Holy Communion. However in 1st Century Israel, that Communion reference wouldn’t have been fully appreciated. So to comprehend this declaration in its historical context, you and I need to [if you’ll excuse the word] *dissect* what Jesus might mean by ‘eating and drinking his flesh and blood’. In Jesus’ day, bread and wine essentially *represented* eating and drinking - breaking bread together; sharing a cup of wine - experiencing family and community, hospitality and sustenance. So at that Passover meal, when Jesus calls the bread his “body” and the wine his “blood”, it makes sense that they eat and drink it, as a way to cherish, celebrate, and commemorate their time together. And though the disciples are likely confused as to what Jesus is actually talking about, the important thing is that they are connecting with their teacher, leader, and friend.

Down through the centuries, however, the multiple interpretations of *how* Jesus’ body and blood are presented in the form of bread and wine, have stifled this sense of connection, community and celebration. The real problem arises, when people insist that *their* interpretation is the only definitive truth! And if you don’t buy-into their specific doctrine, you can be “ex-communicated” - excluded from Communion, and expelled from the faith community! So, Jesus’ inclusive practice of welcoming all people to the Table, gets pushed aside by religious rigidity and human hubris - by power-hungry control freaks

who say, "You can't join us at the Table, because your theological ignorance will offend God!" [Really? It makes you wonder whose ignorance is truly offensive to the Holy One!]

As I've said before, it is crucial for us to remember that Jesus says, "Take and eat!" He doesn't say, "Take and figure it out, and then accurately articulate what it all means!" The truth is, that even if you and I were to use the exact same words to describe what Holy Communion means, our personal *understanding* of those words may not be the same; which is perfectly acceptable! A good meal can give us satisfaction and sustenance, energy and life - even if we don't fully appreciate the fine nuances of the culinary arts, or correctly understand the complex science of nutritional values. In the same way, our eating and drinking of the Communion meal can fill and satisfy us - strengthen and sustain our faith - regardless of how we understand the various theologies surrounding it. That being said, it can still be beneficial for us to contemplate how the life of Jesus Christ can be integrated within those elements of bread and juice.

According to the Jewish Faith, *blood equals Life!* The ancient Hebrews observed that when an animal or a person is injured, and their blood begins to flow-away, their strength and their life *also* flows-away. And when too much blood is lost, Life itself is lost. A creature's life is intricately connected to its blood, which carries throughout the body all that essential "stuff" which is needed to sustain life and vitality. So when Jesus says that he will give his flesh and blood for the Life of the World, he is saying that he will pour out all that he has, and all that he is, for the sake of all people - which is precisely what he does.

Jesus proclaims that Divine compassion and grace are intended for *all people!* And when the power-hungry control freaks of his day tell him, "No, you must stop this - *these* people are not acceptable to God," Jesus doesn't stop! He is willing to speak the truth, and *live* the truth, of the inclusive nature of Divine love - even though he knows that it may ultimately bring him to a cross, where his body will be broken, his blood shed, and his life poured-out for the sake of all humankind. And on that Passover night, as his death appears imminent, Jesus gathers his friends, breaks bread and pours the wine - physical signs of community and nourishment, Life and celebration; as well as historic symbols of Israel's Divine deliverance from Egyptian slavery. And Jesus adopts and embraces these elemental symbols as his own.

“This is my body - this is my blood - broken and poured out for you and for all people, so that you will know and remember that I love you - and that the Holy One loves you - with a love that sets you free, and which transcends death itself! So, please, eat and drink and let that Divine Love and Life which I experience, become a tangible part of each one of you!”

For me, that's what it means to eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We eat bread, we taste juice, yet through these physical elements, we are viscerally reminded of Christ's unfailing promise to be with us, and *within* us; to unite us, strengthen us, and to work through us. By faith, we can *consume* together the Life and Love of Jesus Christ. And by faith, you and I can *be consumed* with that same Life and Love. In Holy Communion, we share of One Bread and Cup, because in spite of any differences we have, we are essentially One Human Family. And the fact is, we *all* need to eat; and most of us *like* to eat - as will be evident at today's Church picnic! But for now, let us share the life and love, the energy and community that are presented to us in the Bread and Cup of Holy Communion - a Divine gift and blessing that is definitely intended for all people!