

EATING THE BODY, DRINKING THE BLOOD—SOUNDS LIKE CANNIBALISM!
A sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 2, 2017
based on John 6:35, 47-63

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross—How the Cross of Christ Can Save You.” We have seen during this series that the cross of Christ is the center of how God acts to reconcile a sinful humanity back into a right relationship with God. We have noted further that there are several aspects of how this reconciliation unfolds, and each aspect can be visualized by thinking of the various points or arms of the cross—with each beam of the cross representing a particular way in which Christ on the cross works for our salvation. We have noted that the cross means *connection*—Jesus on the cross fully connects with our brokenness and our suffering—that connection being well illustrated in the downward beam of the cross. The cross means *sacrifice*—Jesus offers himself as the atoning sacrifice for sin, taking upon himself the punishment that is due for all sin—and this is illustrated in an outstretched arm of the cross. The cross also is a *perfect offering*—Jesus offers his life up to God as a perfect offering on our behalf, offsetting the lack in all humanity, and so lifts us out of brokenness into fellowship with God—this being well represented in the upward arm of the cross. The cross is thus *revelation*—a powerful revelation of the love of God for us, which inspires us to respond in faith and to join in God’s outreach of love for the world—a movement well illustrated in the other outstretched arm of the cross. And in all this the cross is *victory*—a victory over the power of evil and death, which can be symbolized in the center point of the cross.

But then the question becomes—how do we personally become a part of all that unfolds on the cross? How do we experience within ourselves a personal connection with Christ? How do we know that the sacrifice Jesus made is a sacrifice that atones for our own sin? How do we join with Christ in offering our lives upward to God, and in reaching out in love to the world? How do we share in the victory that Christ wins through the cross? Certainly we need to recognize and believe in what Christ has done for us; but somehow we need to grasp the meaning of the cross with more than just our intellect. We need a spiritual connection, and that will be our focus this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

In the passage from the gospel of John that we heard a few moments ago, Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life . . . for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” (John 6:54-56) These words comprise one of Jesus’ most difficult sayings. His disciples certainly thought so. After Jesus had said this, they replied, “This is a hard saying. Who can listen to it?”

Jesus then replied to them saying, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” (John 6:62) And we are likely to say, “What is Jesus talking about?”

These words of Jesus address one of the central problems that we have in connecting with Jesus and with what he has done for us on the cross—namely, the distance between ourselves and Jesus’ actions. The crucifixion was 2000 years ago. How can we connect with that? And Jesus is in heaven. How can we connect with him? When Jesus talks to his disciples about the ascension, he is addressing precisely this problem. Jesus, after the crucifixion and resurrection, would ascend into heaven, to “where he was before,” as he put it, and this would create a serious difficulty for the disciples. How were they to carry on when Jesus was no longer present with them?

The answer is in what he says about “eating his flesh and drinking his blood.” His words, of course, were not meant to be understood literally. As he said, “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (John 6:63) But he gives us a powerful image when he says, “I am the bread of life.” (John 6:35) When we eat bread, it becomes a part of us, and it sustains us, giving us energy and life. So, Jesus is saying, He can become a part of us; He can be within us, sustaining us, giving us energy and life. There may seem to be a great distance between ourselves and heaven; but Jesus’ message is that he has overcome that distance, through the cross, and we can now experience a profound spiritual connection between ourselves and Jesus.

One very important way that this happens is through Communion, which of course is strongly suggested through the particular words that Jesus speaks. The passage that we heard from John about eating Jesus’ body and drinking his blood contains teaching that Jesus gave during his earthly ministry, and his words certainly came back to the disciples when, on the night before the crucifixion, Jesus took bread and said, “This is my body,” and he took a cup of wine and said, “This is my blood.” So Jesus initiated the sacrament of Communion, a symbolic meal, which would be a powerful way in which we could spiritually experience the presence and the working of Christ within us.

The bread and the cup, signifying Christ’s body and blood, represent how Christ has given his life for us; and so as we receive the bread and the cup, we are receiving for ourselves what Christ has done for us on the cross—how he has connected with us, how he has offered himself so that we might be forgiven, how he reconciles us to God. Communion makes the event of the cross present for us today; as we receive into ourselves the Communion elements, we are receiving into ourselves the saving grace of Christ.

Of course, we can also experience Jesus’ presence and working in other ways beyond Communion; but the sacrament of Communion makes a very tangible declaration—that there need not be a great distance between ourselves and the saving event of the cross. The cross is an eternal event—the salvation brought through Christ

applies to every age—and so we can be touched today by the transforming love that Christ is pouring out upon us from the cross. As we eat the bread and drink the cup of Communion, we can experience afresh what Jesus was talking about in our passage when he said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” (John 6:56)

This understanding of Communion—as a way of experiencing a personal connection with the saving grace of Christ—can help us to get past the multiple misunderstandings of Communion that have arisen over the years. In the early days of the church, a rumor arose in the Roman Empire that Christians practiced cannibalism, because they ate somebody’s body and drank blood in their services. Eventually, everyone became clear that Communion was nothing nefarious but was a meal with spiritual meaning. But in the Middle Ages, the church wanted to stress that idea that Christ was really present in Communion; so church leaders developed a theology which said that in Communion the bread and the wine actually change in a mystical way into the body and blood of Christ.¹ But this idea led to all sorts of complications. The church stopped sharing the cup with the congregation, partly out of the fear that in the process of dispensing the wine, a drop could spill out, a drop now of Christ’s blood, and it was horrifying to consider that the blood of Christ might fall onto the floor of the church. Similarly, a great debate was launched at one point in the Middle Ages by the question as to what would happen if a crumb of the consecrated bread—the body of Christ—were to fall unnoticed to the floor and get eaten by a mouse. Would the mouse have taken Communion? What a horrible thought, to imagine a mouse eating the body of Christ! Part of the heritage of that discussion is the fact that in the Catholic church today the Communion bread is in the form of wafers that don’t have crumbs. Protestants reacted against all this by insisting that the Communion elements are symbolic—what happens within the bread and the juice is not nearly so important as what happens spiritually within us. But in the process many Protestants began to see Communion as primarily a kind of a memorial meal, a sort of replay of the Last Supper, that reminds us of the sacrifice of Christ. But if Communion is simply a replay of the Last Supper, then you’ve seen the play before, and it’s not terribly exciting to see it repeated over and over. For this reason, many Protestants, including Methodists, began having Communion very infrequently. When I was growing up in the 1960s, many Protestant churches were in the practice of having Communion just four times a year. In recent years, Protestants and Catholics have come to more common ground in recognizing the essence of Communion—that the sacrament affords a spiritual connection with Christ. In the Catholic church, the cup is now made available to all parishioners, and in our church, we now have Communion monthly.

But past all the details of how church may celebrate Communion, there is a great spiritual reality—that Christ through the cross overcomes the distance between ourselves

and God. As we open our hearts in faith we can come to know the deep truth in Jesus' words—that indeed we may abide in Christ and Christ in us.

ⁱ The doctrine of transubstantiation, defined by the Catholic Church in the 13th century, says that when the words of consecration are spoken over the Communion elements, the outward features of the bread and wine remain the same, but the inner substance is changed into the body and blood of Christ. The fully developed doctrine used Aristotelean categories to describe how the changed happened. The doctrine had antecedents in earlier theology that suggested some sort of mystical transformation in the Communion elements.