

ONE WITH US AND FOR US

Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on August 18, 2024

Text: John 6:51-58

Jesus says his flesh and blood are true food and drink that provide eternal life.

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 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. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

I have a confession to make. I’m getting a little tired of hearing about bread. And I would imagine a lot of you are, too. Four weeks ago, we heard about Jesus feeding the five thousand with three loaves of bread and some fish. And every week since then, we’ve heard him talking about “bread from heaven” and how it’s different than regular bread.

It’s a lot. And this week, it’s starting to feel like too much. Because now Jesus is taking it in kind of a weird direction. This morning we hear him telling people that he is the bread from heaven, and if they want to have eternal life, they need to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

Yuck. It sounds like something out of a horror movie. So, what are we supposed to do with this?

Well, when I put on my academic hat and think about what was going on in the church when John’s gospel was written, somewhere near the end of the first century, it puts Jesus’ words into context

and helps me see them in a different light. Back then there was a big fight going on about the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. That was the theological issue of the day. And what we see in this passage is John giving us his view in the form of a dialogue between Jesus and a bunch of his followers. So, this is really not about cannibalism; it’s about communion. It’s really not about eating and drinking actual flesh and blood; it’s about eating and drinking eucharistic bread and wine.

Which is all well and good, and makes perfect sense. But still, when I take off my academic hat and put on my regular person hat, I can’t help but think, “So what! Who cares!” What does all this talk about heavenly bread and eating Jesus’ flesh have to do with the ins and outs, the ups and downs, of everyday living? What does it have to do with the things that really matter to us—our hopes and fears, our joys and concerns, our successes and failures? What does it have to do

with you and me, here and now, two thousand years later, trying to get from one day to the next?

For most of us, I think, when we're laying there at night, and we can't sleep because our thoughts are racing; when we can't stop worrying about the future; when we're feeling lost and lonely—in those anxious, restless moments, we don't turn to scripture to hear about ancient theological arguments. We turn to scripture for comfort and guidance in dealing with the challenges we face. We turn to scripture for meaning in the big picture sense—Why are we here? and What's our purpose?

So just like the crowds in the reading, I get a little annoyed and frustrated with Jesus' talk about eating and drinking his body and blood when what I really need is something solid, something concrete, something I can hold on to when I'm having one of those dark nights of the soul.

The people in those crowds want to know, "How can this man give us his flesh?" and I get where they're coming from. What they're really saying is, "Stop talking nonsense, Jesus, and give us something real. We don't need disturbing images. We don't need bizarre-sounding metaphors. We need you to speak to our lives. We need you to connect with our experiences."

But instead of softening his tone or taking a different approach, Jesus doubles-down. "I'm telling you the truth," he insists, "if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in yourselves." Sounds pretty clear to me. Sounds like more than a veiled reference to communion. Sounds like someone who means what he says—someone who literally gives us his flesh and blood to eat and drink.

But we're Presbyterians! We don't go there. So how can this be?

The answer, I think, is right there in that phrase, "flesh and blood." In Jesus' day, that was a figure of speech, and it meant more than just a person's physical body. It encompassed their whole self. It was shorthand for everything that made a person who they were: their thoughts, their memories, their feelings, their strengths, their weaknesses, their hopes, their fears, their joys, their sorrows—everything that made them them.

So, when Jesus tells people to eat and drink his flesh and blood, what he's really doing is offering them himself—all of him, heart, mind and soul. He's telling them to take his very being into themselves. He's telling them to ingest his life so it becomes part of theirs—so his thoughts become their thoughts, his will becomes their will, his vision becomes their vision, his purpose becomes their purpose.

And this isn't the only time in John when we hear this kind of thing. This isn't the only time when we hear about the extremely close relationship between Jesus and his followers. All through the gospel, John describes that relationship in different ways: Jesus is the shepherd, and his followers are the sheep; Jesus is the vine, and his followers are the branches; Jesus abides in God, and his followers abide in him.

John uses lots of different images to get across the same basic idea. But there's something unique about this passage. It takes that idea and goes a step further. It doesn't describe the closeness between Jesus and his followers. It describes the oneness between Jesus and his followers.

Martin Copenhaver was a pastor and a writer, and he puts it like this. "In this passage," he says, "language is pressed

to the limits to express the indissoluble union and inextricable participation of one life in another. For those who receive Jesus, the whole Jesus, his life clings to their bones and courses through their veins. He can no more be taken from the believer's life than last Tuesday's breakfast can be plucked from one's body."

That's the promise behind all this talk about bread from heaven and eating and drinking flesh and blood. That's the promise behind all the ancient arguments about the meaning of the Lord's Supper. And that's the promise that gets us through all of our anxious, restless moments—if we accept it; if we put our trust in it. God is one both with us and for us. God is part of us and can never be extracted or removed from us. God joins us in all of our humanness, and merges with us in all of our weakness, so we become something new, something more.

And how that happens, I can't really tell you. I just know it does. I just know that God's life is always working its way into our lives and changing who we are—healing us, and redeeming us, and leading us even when we're not aware of it.

It's like the old joke about preaching. One church member says to another, "You know, I've been coming here for the past fifty years, and I can only remember maybe two or three sermons. What's the point? I could've just stayed home this whole time." The other church member shrugs and says, "I've been eating dinner for the past fifty years, and I can only remember maybe two or three meals. Doesn't mean they weren't all important. Doesn't mean they didn't all feed and nourish me."

From one day to the next, we don't always know that God is with us, and

sometimes we get annoyed and frustrated that we can't feel God's presence in the midst of all our struggles. But God is always here, and God will never leave us. Amen.