

“So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” 1. (oops!) Did Jesus really just say, eat and drink his flesh and blood? Even for a Lutheran, this is a hard passage to read because Jesus is so blunt about His teaching.

We’re finishing the last of our three-week sermon series on Jesus as the Bread of Life. Two weeks ago, we discussed that Jesus is the Bread of Life who not only provides bread and circuses but provides us a reason to live. Last week, we discussed that Jesus’ flesh and blood contains preservatives that keep us steadfast in the true faith unto life everlasting. Today we’re going to take a look into what it means when Jesus talks about His flesh and blood being true food and true drink.

As we gather here today and reflect on Jesus’ words at their face value we have to wonder. 2. (ugh!) Why would Jesus promote cannibalism? Jesus said, **“For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”** This saying of Jesus has provoked no small amount of consternation in the history of the Church.

The Pagan opponents in the times of the early church accused the Christians of being cannibals. The Radical Reformers, the ones who denied that Jesus was present in the Lord’s Supper, they would ridicule the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans. One non-Lutheran Reformer reportedly tore up a piece of bread and laughed saying, “Fine body!”

But you don’t need to walk through Church History to see the scandal of Jesus’ statements. Not only were the Jews grumbling, but **“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”**” This Bread of Life discourse took a weird turn, Jesus. Maybe you should have thought more carefully about what you said. He lost many disciples to this apparent demand to cannibalism.

And it makes sense. No good Jew would want to drink blood, let alone human blood. Blood was definitely not kosher, and you could get kicked out of the community if you did such a thing. More than that, not eating other humans is just an unwritten rule of society. I shouldn’t need to explain that.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” We can’t escape these words of Jesus. And what’s going to happen later in this service? Many of you are going to come up to the front, and what am I and an elder going to say to you? “The body of Christ, given for you; the blood of Christ, shed for you.”

This whole flesh and blood thing seems to be messy business in the Church at large. Some Christians take this perhaps almost too seriously. Our Roman Catholic friends teach that the bread and wine disappears, and you’re only eating body and blood, maybe we could accuse them of being the cannibals.

Our Baptist and Reformed friends say that Jesus is only speaking in figurative terms, and that the bread and wine only symbolize a greater reality. Maybe we could accuse them of not taking Jesus' words seriously enough. What is a Christian to do?

When the crowds disperse and it seems just the twelve are standing before Jesus, He says to them **“Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,”** I think the key to understanding all of this lies in first believing 3. (aha!) Jesus has the words of eternal life.

It's almost as if Peter was saying to Jesus, “Lord, to whom else shall we go? We're at the end of our road, here. We've got no other options. You're our last hope. *You* have the words of eternal life.” That's the key to unlocking much of what Jesus is saying in this chapter from John 6. Jesus is not one option among many. He's not contingency plan. He is the plan, and we hang on His words. That's what it means to have faith in Jesus. To trust in Him, and that is how we understand much of John 6. WE FEAST ON JESUS THROUGH FAITH.

First, 4. (whee!) We eat of Jesus' flesh and blood spiritually. Jesus tells us **“Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”** The first and primary way we feed on Jesus is through faith in Him. That is to trust in Him. Perhaps this is part of Jesus' aim in His Bread of Life discourse. He is wanting to separate the wheat from the chaff. He wants to sort out the followers who just want their next meal of bread from the true believers.

Often in our spiritual walks with Jesus, there will come a turning point. Something bad will happen and maybe things will get weird. Jesus will make a demand of us that just rubs us the wrong way: give up that sin, reach out to that friend, or perhaps take on that new ministry opportunity. This demand can tempt us to run for the hills and never come back. Christ is always challenging us, are you with me for the things I give you, or for who I am?

Yet Christ is always calling to us, telling us of who He is! We spiritually feast on Jesus as we hear God's Word and keep it near and dear to our hearts. It is in this word that we learn who Jesus is, and that He can be trusted. It is this word that teaches us that true God has come in the flesh and blood person of Jesus to give us eternal life.

We feast on Christ by faith when we see Him bleeding on the cross, and then understand His words: **“And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”** The bread that humanity needs is not another restaurant downtown, but the bread of life bleeding and dying for their sins and renewal.

It is this feasting on His Word and Promises that gives us life. It is this trusting that He has come in the flesh to redeem us and raise us up just as He was raised that gives us life. It is this spiritual eating and drinking that then strengthens

us to trust Him when things get weird, when things get tough, when we don't see where and when something will end. It is this spiritual eating and drinking in His Word and Promises that lets us call out, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,”** We feast on Jesus Christ spiritually through faith.

And yet we cannot just hand wave away these words of Christ. In addition to this spiritual eating, there is something more going on. 5. (yeah!) We eat of Jesus' flesh and blood sacramentally, not as cannibals. It's hard to worm our way out of Jesus' words, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”** We would say first of all that that eating happens through faith in Jesus, that is the spiritual eating, but in addition to that, Jesus does give us His body and blood to eat and to drink.

In the Lord's Supper, Jesus gave us His body and blood to drink under the forms of bread and wine such that even today, we are in part fulfilling Jesus' demand to eat His flesh and drink His blood. And yet we need faith in Jesus and His promises to unlock the benefits for us in this meal. Spiritual feasting by faith is a prerequisite for helpful and healthy feasting by the mouth. We trust that Jesus gives us forgiveness, life, and salvation as He is truly present in this meal, and so we receive this meal to our benefit and not to our detriment.

Christ is truly present in this meal. Our Lutheran Confessions write, “The other kind of eating of Christ's body is oral or sacramental, when all who eat and drink the consecrated bread and wine in the Supper receive and partake of the true, essential body and blood of Christ orally. Believers receive it as a certain pledge and assurance that their sins are truly forgiven and that Christ dwells in them with his power” (FC SD VII 63). In other words, as real as the wafer on your tongue and the wine on your lips—that's how real Christ's forgiveness is for you in this meal as He brings you His very body and blood for forgiveness, life, and salvation.

We believe that bread and body, wine and blood are all present in this meal, and this union is a mystery to us. It is not cannibalism. It's not as though Cindy can say, “I got a bit of Christ's arm today,” and Trevor can say, “I ate some of Christ's liver in my wafer!” That's missing the point of the John 6 discourse. The early pagans who criticized the church for cannibalism had it wrong. The radical reformers who tore up pieces of consecrated bread as a way of mocking the real presence were mistaken.

It all comes back to faith. We feast on Christ spiritually through trusting His promises, and this trust drives us to follow Him. This trust drives us to believe Him when He says this is my body, and this is my blood. This trust opens our lips so that we can praise Him, and it opens our mouth so that we can be fed by the Bread of Life in a meal that is more than just wafers and wine, but is His true body and true blood. May we feast on this Lord forever to strengthen us all the days of our earthly journey. Amen!