

Lord, open our ears to hear your Word spoken to us; Open our hearts to be changed by Your Spirit. Amen.

Flesh and blood. We use those words to convey a lot of things:

Reality: "He was right there, in the flesh!"

Relationship: "She's my own flesh and blood." "Blood is thicker than water."

Reality and Relationship: that's what we encounter in this meal,
This "power snack" we share each week in communion.

Jesus was shockingly literal about it: *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.* Did he have to be quite so graphic?

He was a Jew speaking in a synagogue, to Jews who wouldn't even eat meat unless all the blood had been drained out of it.

How could he speak of eating his flesh and drinking his blood?

This language is at the heart of our worship life, this ritual of eating God.

And since the beginning many have charged that this Eucharist thing of ours is just plain cannibalistic. Who can blame them?

In our own prayer book we have this prayer: *"Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us."*

How else are we to take Jesus' words: *I am the bread of life.*

Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.

Referring to himself as bread is a fairly explicit invitation to be eaten.

And lest we think he's just being metaphorical, he gets more explicit:

The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

And, of course, at the Last Supper Jesus made it even clearer to his disciples, when he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them saying,
This is my body given for you. Eat this to remember me.

We might have a whole range of reactions to a statement like that.

We might think the speaker is crazy, or dismiss the whole notion as preposterous.

Many of Jesus' followers had a similar response: *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it."* John tells us,

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

Well, we're here. We're sticking around. But what are we doing in eucharist? Is this ritualized cannibalism, this rite at the center of our worship?

There's something to that – I'm told that cultures that practice cannibalism believe that by eating your enemy you gain his power, ingest his life. And we believe that in the eucharist we take Christ's life and power into us; We are renewed and re-empowered to be His body as we eat and drink his body and blood.

But Jesus was not advocating cannibalism. He himself offered the elements of bread and wine to stand in for his flesh and blood. He was offering more than power – he was offering life. He said, *“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.”*

Because Jesus gave his flesh for the life of the world, for us, we eat the Word of God, the Lamb of God, the Bread of Heaven, We re-enter this heavenly reality each time we come to this table.

We enter that eternal time, the “eighth day” of creation at this altar. It's not only about life after death – it's also life for the here and now: *Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.* Abide means to “stay with,” to “hang out.” We re-connect with Jesus at this meal each week; we renew our awareness of his life abiding in us.

Jews believe that the life of a person is in the blood – so this wine we drink, this bread we eat, is a renewal of Jesus' life in us. I like to call it a “holy transfusion,” whereby our tired blood supply is renewed with the richest, freshest universal-blood-type blood.

What are the components of blood?

Plasma... salt... preservative and life;
red blood cells that bring nutrients to the whole body;
clotting factor, that preserves the blood;
white blood cells, that rush to the site of an injury or build up when the body faces a viral or bacterial threat.

As we receive this blood, full of spiritual nutrients, we become the blood of Christ, offering these ministries in the world – energy, healing, clotting, immunity. And we become the bread of Christ, allowing ourselves to be broken by the pain around us, giving ourselves and our resources away so there is enough for all. This bread and wine connect us to the life of God in the heavenly places.

And this meal we eat is also a connector between our life and the world around us. This has a horizontal dimension as well as a vertical.

It has become a central feature of Episcopal worship not only because of its roots in the teachings of Jesus and ancient church practice – it is because here we re-enact the story of God’s love for the world, that rewrites the endings to the story the world tells us.

I want to read this quote from Dwight Zscheile’s book, *People of the Way*, about renewing our Christian identity as Episcopalians:

Every Sunday in ordinary Episcopal churches, something extraordinary takes place. In a society in which tables of hospitality are mostly closed off to strangers, a public feast is held. You don’t need to buy a ticket to this meal. Not everyone necessarily knows each other; not everyone gets along perfectly; but they come together nonetheless. The food is simple stuff – bread and wine – about to become something more than itself. As the story is told and songs are sung, a change takes place. Hearts are lifted. The brokenness in the lives of each of the participants, and the brokenness of the world, is brought into focus. Healing begins to pour through it. Lives turned inward are opened outward. In the midst of the messiness and richness of this meal is the presence of Jesus, felt and known through the Spirit, tasted in the bread and wine, inviting us and the whole of the world into community with God.¹

We receive this flesh and blood to be reminded that God became flesh and blood to reclaim us as his own, to ensure relationship with us.

We receive this flesh and blood to proclaim that Jesus is real and alive in and through his body, the Church, across all time and space.

We receive this flesh and blood to be renewed in body and spirit to make this love of God known to the world around us, to specific people in specific places.

How are you going to make this love known this week?

To whom are you going to proclaim it?

What new endings are you going to offer to people locked into the endings they’re used to, which are often dead ends? Where will you carry hope?

As we sometimes pray over this meal:

Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name. Amen.

¹ Dwight J. Zscheile, *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity* (2012, Morehouse Publishing)

John 6:53-59

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.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.