

Nathan Brown
 “Getting to Know Jesus”
 August 23, 2009
 West Side Christian Church

John 6:55-69

I remember a colleague of mine telling me about an interesting experience she had while serving communion one Sunday morning. Right after this minister took the bread and declared, “Take, eat, this is my body,” and took the cup and said, “this is my blood, drink of it all of you,” a little girl sitting with her family blurted out, “Oh, Yuk!”

I think, “Oh, yuk!” is precisely what Jesus’ disciples were thinking as he spoke to them in our reading from John this morning. Jesus says, “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.”

You can imagine that if you were a first century Jew hearing these words, they might be a bit disturbing. Remember that Jewish law forbade eating any kind of flesh with blood in it, let alone human flesh. Additionally, the Greek words used here for “eat” and “drink” are better translated as “gnaw” and “gulp.” Don’t forget too, they have not yet had the last Supper with Jesus and so they do not quite understand the symbolic nature of what Jesus is saying.¹

As a result, John writes, “When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’” Jesus even realizes how unsettled his disciples are by his words and is compelled to ask, “Does this offend you?” There is no question that the disciples must have had that very raw, visceral response of, “Oh, yuk!”

In fact, it’s texts like this one that made the Romans and others suspicious that first century Christians were really cannibals of some sort. One of the charges often leveled against early Christians was that they ate other human beings, based on the fact that they talked about eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their savior, their God. So, rumors spread that Christians were kidnapping and eating other people as well. Even if the leaders, the educated classes, didn’t really believe it, it was still a useful tool for stirring up the mob against this upstart religion.²

I guess the point I am trying to make is that “Oh, yuk!” would have been *our* response in the first century also. There is no question that we would have been weirded out by these words that, today, seem so natural and comfortable. Back then we would

¹ Willimon, William. “Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word*. Proper 15 (Sunday between August 14 and August 20 inclusive). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. Pg. 359-361.

² Adkins, Julie. “Do You Know About Jesus? Or Do You Know Jesus?” Sermon: John 6:51-58. *Lectionary Homiletics Online*. Back Issues Plus.

have been the ones saying, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” And just like some of the disciples in this reading, some of *us* may have turned back and no longer went about with him.

Maybe that’s the problem...that we are no longer weirded out by these words...that we no longer think to ourselves, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept this?” Perhaps the problem is we’ve heard these words too often. This is certainly the argument that other denominations make against us Disciples for taking communion each and every week, instead of once a month or once a quarter. Maybe there is kernel of truth in that critique.

Have we made Jesus’ words of “eat my flesh and drink my blood” so utterly "symbolic," and no more, that they have lost their power? When we hear these words read, do we think, “Ho hum, that must be about communion. Wonder why he’s preaching on that, we already had communion this morning?” What if the text really isn’t just about bread and wine?³

Okay, so now its time for *me* to weird all of you out. In doing some research for the sermon this week, I did stumble across quite a bit of information and history on cannibalism. Believe it or not, cannibalism is not just something for socio-paths. It is actually an integral part of many cultures.

The reasons for cannibalism in these cultures are varied, but there are two dominant modes of thought. The first is part of warfare. You defeat an enemy, and then you cook and eat him. It’s a way of symbolizing his utter defeat, and your complete victory. You’ve not just left him on the field for the vultures to get; you have consumed him yourself. You have completely destroyed him, by making him a part of you.

The second type of cannibalism might be even more troublesome for you. In some cultures, the eating of human flesh occurs only in the case of an ancestor, a loved one, who has died of whatever cause. In other words, when granny dies, granny’s family gathers around and has a feast. The main dish is granny, or at least, key parts of her that have meaning in that culture.

This has nothing to do with wanting to destroy the person who has died, or even with trying to keep their spirit from bothering you. It has to do with taking that person into yourself in the hope of becoming like that person. While we may be grossed out at this point, I think we can at least understand that wish?⁴

There are probably qualities about your loved ones that you wish you had. Perhaps more patience, more grace, more generosity, more understanding. While we would never consider devouring our loved ones in order to become more like them, we

³ Adkins, Ibid.

⁴ Adkins, Ibid.

can certainly understand the desire to be more like them. We can understand that it would have powerful symbolic meaning for those who would participate in such a ritual.⁵

So, have I completely grossed you out yet? I worry the only possible lesson you might receive from this sermon today is one on cannibalism...but I do think it is relevant to what Jesus says to his disciples in this reading from John. Jesus is using jarring imagery, as he always does, with this cannibalistic metaphor, in order to make his point about what it means to be his followers.

Jesus is not just implying, but is directly telling his disciples that following him does not just mean aimlessly wandering behind—it means actually taking Jesus into ourselves. “Following” might not even be an appropriate word given his metaphor.

If Jesus is asking his disciples to ingest him, than Jesus is actually telling them to stop “following” and start “becoming.” The imagery of flesh and blood then becomes more literal than it does symbolic. We become the flesh and blood of Jesus, we become his body, and we are to experience Christ in the flesh and blood of both ourselves and one another.

For far too long, I knew plenty *about* Jesus. Religion was, more or less, an intellectual exercise. I got my degree in religious studies at TCU; I got my Masters of Divinity at Vanderbilt. I have led numerous Bible studies, preached hundreds of sermons, read thousands of books, articles, and journals. I have spent gobs of money becoming educated *about* the God we worship each and every Sunday morning.

However, it has only been in the last few years that I have moved from knowing *about* Jesus to actually beginning to *experience* Jesus. I think we all have this struggle. We tend to make Jesus into this abstract concept that we read about in our Bibles, we hear about in worship, we think about in prayer, we understand symbolically in communion. We sit back, comfortable in the pew, cooling considering him as if he is some disembodied idea. As a result, we forget about his literal flesh and blood in the here and now: you and me.

I know the thought of taking Jesus "into ourselves" implies a kind of intimacy that makes many of us squeamish...to the point that we might even think, “Oh, yuk!” Do I really want Jesus to know me that well, down even to the cellular level?! Do I want him to influence me that deeply, to exercise control over every aspect of my living? Do I really want to *know* Jesus...or am I content with knowing *about* Jesus?⁶

These are the questions Jesus poses to his disciples, these are the questions Jesus poses to us, each and every time we hear the words, “Take, eat, this is my body...this is my blood, drink of it all of you.”

⁵ Adkins, Ibid.

⁶ Adkins, Ibid.

Knowing Jesus means something different for everyone. I cannot tell you what exactly it looks like for your life. It might mean doing some things differently. It might mean not doing some things at all. It might mean starting to do some new things. It might mean to love some people we don't much like. It might mean making a sacrifice of some kind for the greater good. It might mean for some of us to grow up, and others of us to loosen up.⁷

Regardless of the specifics, for all of us, knowing Jesus, truly taking Jesus into ourselves means drastic change. Eating his flesh and drinking his blood means allowing him to transform our lives from the inside out—it means becoming this flesh and blood that we symbolically consume week in and week out. Rather than continuing to know *about* Jesus, let's work on getting to *know* Jesus. Amen.

⁷ Adkins, *Ibid.*