

Shocking. Surprising. Scandalous. Hearing these words we just heard, Jesus' disciples were shocked and surprised and scandalized. Immediately after the ending of today's gospel lesson, we read that "many of Jesus' disciples, [when they heard this teaching about Jesus, the living bread,] said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'" A few verses later, we read that "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." Jesus words were shocking. Surprising. Scandalous. When we pay attention to what Jesus actually says in John 6, we can understand how the disciples found them to be shocking, surprising, and scandalous.

The disciples and other Jews who heard Jesus' words must have shrunk from him in shock, at least initially. For first century Jews, eating "flesh" was a scandalous act forbidden by the Torah. Drinking blood was an even more scandalous act. Jesus' invitation was shocking.

For us moderns, too, Jesus' words in today's gospel can be scandalous. In 2003, a blogger named Jim Walker identified Christians as cannibals and vampires, since we eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood. Another scandal in Jesus' words is their exclusive nature. In John, Jesus seems to say that life is found only in Christ, that, in order to live, we must feast on Jesus, receiving sustenance from him. What does this mean for Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs? Here's how I would answer that question. Our neighbors of other faiths live in close fellowship with God without Jesus, but for those of us who follow Jesus, for those of us who commit our lives to him, there is no life without him.

Certainly Jesus, in his scandalous words, means neither that those who follow him are cannibals or vampires—nor that only Christians may participate in the life of God. So what does he mean? Listen again: "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... 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."

We can understand how someone would hear these words as advocating cannibalism or vampirism—or even an exclusive and judgmental Christianity. But Jesus was hardly ever literal—and seldom judgmental, at least not of those who genuinely sought companionship with God. What, then, does he mean by these strange words? What does he want us to know about eating and drinking? Is he talking about eating and drinking in Holy Communion—or about something else? What do you think? Over the centuries, scholars have offered many interpretations of Jesus' words about himself as "the living bread." Does Jesus mean that we should eat his actual flesh and drink his actual blood? Does he mean that he is the only way to find fellowship with God? What does Jesus mean by saying, "Eat my body. Drink my blood"?

Some Christian scholars do follow a **literal** interpretation of Jesus' words. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, follows a literal interpretation in its doctrine of "transubstantiation." For Roman Catholics, the bread literally turns into Jesus' body, and the wine literally turns into Jesus' blood, although the church does not understand this to be cannibalism. This is why it's a problem if you drop a wafer in a Roman Catholic mass, because, having been transubstantiated into Jesus' body, the wafer is holy; it's highly disrespectful to drop Jesus on the floor. Another literal interpretation leads to a requirement that communion must be received in both kinds, in both bread and wine. If Jesus says, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you," he means that you have to eat AND drink, or you will not have life. That's a literal interpretation.

Other Christian scholars argue for a **sacramental** interpretation of John 6, claiming that Jesus is talking here about the bread and wine of the Eucharist. These scholars note that, unlike the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the gospel of John has no account of the Institution of the Lord's Supper, that John reports neither Jesus gathering with his disciples to institute—or establish—the sacrament of Holy Communion at his last meal with them, nor any sort of Words of Institution. At his last meal, the meal of the Passover, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus gives the disciples communion, saying, "This is my body. This is my blood," but in John he does not. Instead, he washes their feet. From the first three gospels we know that Jesus took bread—and broke it—and took a cup—and gave thanks—and gave them to his disciples. In John, we hear those same words, but not in the context of communion. In John, Jesus takes bread and gives thanks and distributes it, not at the Last Supper, but when? At the Feeding of the 5,000. Then, the next day, he commands his disciples to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Scholars who practice a sacramental interpretation believe that John 6 is about communion.

Other scholars espouse **metaphorical** interpretations. They assert that in John 6 we encounter an especially vivid metaphor of the bread and wine of the Eucharist as the flesh and blood of Christ. They reason that when Jesus says "eat my flesh" and "drink my blood," he's not talking so much about communion as an action as he is talking about believing in Jesus. These scholars take the concepts of eating bread as Jesus' body and drinking wine as Jesus' blood as metaphors for believing in Jesus.

Yet other scholars offer a **relational** interpretation of this passage. They stress that Jesus' identification of himself as bread is neither a statement about his literal body and blood—nor about bread and wine as a metaphor of himself—but, rather, an invitation into full relationship with him and participation in his life-giving power. Let me repeat that. Jesus is inviting his followers into full relationship with him and participation in his life-giving power. ELCA Seminary Professor Ginger Barfield follows this relational interpretation; she lists the relational benefits that Jesus offers his followers in John 6. Did you catch them? There are six: 1) to have life ongoing on this side of the grave; 2) to be raised on the last day; 3) to abide in Jesus; 4) to have Jesus abide in them; 5) to live because of and for the sake of Jesus; and 6) to live forever. Eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood, according to Dr. Barfield, is more about living with Jesus, about hanging around him to the extent that we take him into our very selves, than it is specifically about eating communion bread and drinking communion wine.

During COVID, as we first fasted from the Eucharist altogether and then, for months, from our traditional methods of receiving it, I thought a lot about communion—and how important it is in my

faith life—and how its literal-ness, its physicality, and its earthiness matters. Having been denied the bread and the wine for several months, I am more grateful than ever that we get to eat Jesus' body and drink his blood, that we have the privilege of feasting on Jesus, with all our senses, hearing the words of Jesus, smelling the wine, tasting the bread, receiving Jesus himself on our lips and tongues, digesting him so that he lives in us.

How are you eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood, my friend? How do you take him into yourself? How do you feast on Jesus? Certainly by worshipping, by hearing the Scriptures read, by engaging the sermon, by singing songs and hymns and spiritual songs, by praying, by receiving the Eucharist, whether you do these things alone at home while you participate on-line or in physical community in the sanctuary. Certainly you can eat and drink Jesus by gathering with other Christians, around your dinner table or in your breakfast nook, as you read the Bible alone or with others, at church over ZOOM, as you share family or personal devotions. But you also eat Jesus' body and drink his blood as you meet with others who bring Jesus to you, in word or deed, as you are open to Jesus showing up in both expected and unexpected places, whether sacred or secular, as you receive the witness or service of others, or share your own witness or service, whether in-person or virtually. And you can also feast on Jesus in silence, praying to God, listening to God, whether at an Evening Prayer service or in your bedroom or on your back porch or at the beach. In all these ways, you live with Jesus. You hang around him. You eat his body and drink his blood. You feast on him.

By hanging around with Jesus, by being in relationship with him, by letting him rub off on you, by receiving him, you take him into your very self. He comes into you, into your body, into your soul, into your mouth, into your ears, onto your tongue. He comes and feeds you with his very self, not only in bread and wine, but also in song and Scripture, in your praying and in your playing, in the kindness of a friend and in the need of a stranger.

This is scandalous stuff, my fellow followers of Jesus. Shocking stuff. Jesus' teaching is difficult, as we will hear his disciples complain next week. Not only because of the flesh and blood. It's also scandalous that Jesus gives us his very self. It's difficult because he brings his God-ness—and his goodness—to you and to me, who are neither God nor good. He comes down from heaven and takes on our humanity, and he gives us his divinity. He takes on our death, and gives us his life, life from heaven, eternal life. As we eat his body and drink his blood, his life—his heavenly, eternal life—lives in us. Surprising! Shocking! Scandalous! AMEN