

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” ...

It’s no wonder the early Christians were accused of cannibalism. And it’s no wonder that the first time someone comes to a church that celebrates eucharist, there is often some discomfort at the idea of eating Jesus’ body and drinking his blood.

Now, this passage does not explicitly say that Jesus’ body is bread and his blood is wine, but it is clear that there are eucharistic overtones linking this saying of Jesus to our practice of the sacrament of holy eucharist. The folks Jesus was speaking to in the gospel don’t know about the Last Supper yet and so they ask, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Over the centuries, the Church has also struggled with the question of “How.” “How, exactly, does this bread and this wine become the body and blood of Christ?” As Michael Atkinson mentioned in his sermon last week, the answers to this “How” question range from “transubstantiation” to “real presence” to “symbolic meal.” [Anglican eucharistic theology, by the way, falls under the “real presence” category, with variations of course.]

All this is interesting and it’s important, to a certain extent. But I think there’s a totally different question to be asked... “*Why?*”

*Why* do we eat Jesus’ flesh and drink Jesus’ blood?

The How question is interesting but the Why question is incredibly important. And that is what this passage from John is trying to answer. “Why eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood?” So we can *abide* in Jesus and have *eternal life*.

We don’t often hear the word abide, it’s not in our normal lexicon these days. When we do, it usually has to do with following rules. A company has to abide by these laws or regulations. Is that what Jesus is getting at? Eating his flesh and drinking his blood a is rule we are supposed to follow, and when we do he’ll somehow be in us. Does that then mean that, if Jesus is in us and we’re in him, we can do no wrong? We’re without sin, like him?

No. Of course, not. The eucharist is not a rule to be followed nor do we become perfect after we receive it. Lots of trouble has come from believing either or these two things. The question still remains then... What *does* “abide in me, and I in them” really mean?

The other readings today give us some clues to this question. Our Old Testament reading closes out our time with King David and brings us to the reign of Solomon around 970 BCE. David and Solomon are both great examples of how can we abide, and *not* abide with God.

David was God’s chosen ruler and is the greatest king in Israel’s history. He stabilized Israel’s monarchy and grew the power and prestige of the Jewish people. He was also a poet and wrote 73 of the 150 psalms

in the Bible. But he also used his power to sleep with Bathsheba and have her husband Uriah killed. Even though David repented when confronted by the prophet Nathan, the consequences of his actions followed him, resulting in the rebellion and death of his son Absalom, which we heard about last week, as well as infighting among his remaining sons as to who was the rightful successor to the throne.

Enter Solomon. Solomon was David's third son that he had with Bathsheba. He was able to gain David's blessing as the heir, even though he was not the oldest, and that's where we pick up the story today. Solomon, (around age fifteen by the way), is just beginning his reign, and during a trip to make sacrifices to God, God appears to Solomon in a dream and asks what God should give him. Solomon answers, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." Solomon didn't ask for life or riches but wisdom and understanding. For that Solomon gets *both* and becomes the wisest, wealthiest king in Israel's history. But... as with his father David, Solomon lets his power go to his head and he gathers too many wives, too much tribute, starts worshipping foreign gods, and leaves a legacy of infighting that breaks apart the twelve tribes of Israel such that only two are left standing a century later.

Two dedicated and flawed people--capable of greatness and greed, faithfulness and failure. Sound familiar? While we may not be kings,

each of us is capable of great kindness and of great hurt, and sometimes each can happen while we think we're doing the right thing. And yet, Jesus says if we eat of Jesus' flesh and drink of his blood, we abide in him and he in us.

Abiding with Jesus is not about never doing anything wrong--we can't do that no matter how hard we try, nor is that what it's all about anyway. Abiding with Jesus is about living our lives in relationship with God's life, which is eternal life.

When we think about eternal life, we often think about heaven and life after death. That's part of it, but eternal life is not just about what happens to us when we die. It's about how we are called to live while we're alive. It's not about the duration of the after-life. It's about the quality of our present-life.

That is the gift that eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood offers us--a relationship with God who is both outside of time and who took on flesh and dwelt among us. Living in relationship with God gives us a fuller, richer life because we are connected to the source of light and life. That's what it means to be "filled with the Spirit," as in the reading from Ephesians. To be wise, making the most of the time we have on earth, singing songs and giving thanks together for the blessing that it is to have eternal life and to abide in Christ.

And just to be clear, abiding with Jesus and having eternal life are not things we earn, either by ingesting consecrated bread and wine or abiding by all the spiritual rules and regulations we set up for ourselves. It is a gift, freely given by God, in Jesus, that we participate in each and every day as we love God and love our neighbor. All we have to do is receive the gift and share it with others.

It's such a blessing to be part of this church isn't it? There is so much holy work that happens through the people of this church that it's hard to keep up with. Not only do we have a whole host of programs and ministries but St. Paul's members show their love for God and neighbor in so many ways out in the community, in their workplace, at home, and with friends. We are all called to be ministers and this is a fantastic place to be ministers together. Loving and caring for one another and for our community. That's just what this world needs right now isn't it? It always has and God has always been calling the world to abide with God and live into eternal life. Don't you think it would be great if more people could experience the rich life of faith as we know it here at St. Paul's?

Well, I want to tell you about an opportunity that's coming up in the life of this parish to help with that. On September 9th we're having our annual fall kick-off and this year we're calling it "Invitation Sunday." Jesus is always inviting us into deeper relationship with him

and this Sunday is a chance for us to invite someone we know to come and be part of this community as well. To help with that, we've made 100 of these postcards that I would like to invite you to use to invite someone you know to come join you at Invitation Sunday. The front has the info and some pictures and the back has some words of invitation as well as space to write an extra note, or sign your name. And... they're already stamped. There's no pressure. Don't take one if you don't want to invite someone. But if you want to invite more than one person go for it! Let's get these 100 invitations out to our friends, neighbors, coworkers, anyone, so that they, too, can come and experience our loving, life-giving, liberating God.

I'd like to close with a story of the power of personal invitation. When I was a sophomore in college, one of my theology classmates invited me come to a breakfast Bible study at his flat. Dave was in my same degree program but noticed that I hadn't really gotten involved much church stuff outside of class. So he invited me to come to this low-key Bible study and I said yes. Then, after a few months of really enjoying that, he asked if I wanted to be on the "Events and Evangelism Team" for the Christian Union. Now, for a cradle-born Episcopalian, even one from North Carolina, "evangelism" was not a word I was comfortable with. But I knew that I felt God's presence in the Bible study and I felt this call to not get stuck in my old practices of faith but

to try something new. I accepted his invitation and my faith and experience of God grew so much during my last two years of college. I tell you this story because I know that if Dave had not made a personal invitation, I would not have grown the ways I did, ways which I know profoundly shaped my future and certainly enhanced my life.

So I invite you to do two things: after the service, take one of those postcards and send it to someone you think might be open to coming to church with you. But first, I invite you to accept Jesus' invitation to come and eat his flesh and drink his blood that you might abide in him and he in you so that you may have eternal life.

Amen.