

Communion Sunday

John 6:51-56, 1:1; Matthew 4:1-4

1. Devour Jesus.

2. Devour Jesus: follow Him to death.

- *Mark 8:34-35*

3. Devour Jesus for life.

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Communion Sunday

If you were a Roman citizen in the first century and you were a follower of the mainstream media, you would be convinced that Christians were cannibals. That was one of the common accusations by Roman society and government of the early Christians.

It's really not that hard to see why they thought that when you look at the words of Jesus in John 6. This is the passage we're going to look at today, so would you stand with me while I read it to us? Thank you; it helps us honor and focus on God's Word:

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

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. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them." (John 6:51-56, niv)

Thank you for standing; please have a seat.

This is a very difficult thing to understand. It is strange and offensive to us, just like it was to Jesus' disciples and the Jews when they heard Jesus say it.

So before we understand it for our own lives, we probably need to understand the context in which John first wrote it, and then the context of what Jesus was saying.

I mentioned earlier that the first century Christians were accused of cannibalism, among other things. It was in that environment in the latter quarter of the first century that John wrote his Gospel – probably in the AD 70s. Right before that in the 60s was when the Emperor Nero was responsible for the Great Fire of Rome, and he blamed it on the Christians. By that time, the Christians had been practicing communion as a part of their regular gathering and worship for thirty years. So it was easy for Nero to get public opinion against the Christians, accusing them of ritual cannibalism, by taking out of context their practice of communion and what Jesus said. Most Romans were suspicious of the Christians anyway, because they were a new and growing religious group that refused to worship Rome's many gods or their emperor worship. So it was easy for them to believe Nero. Nero also took the fact that the Christians called themselves the family of God and accused them of incest.

So it was in that atmosphere that John wrote about his experiences with Jesus. John had been Jesus' closest friend, but he was getting close to the end of his life. The church *needed* John to put some things down in writing so it wouldn't die with him.

But when you think about the climate that John was in, I find it interesting that John recorded this statement of Jesus (rumors of cannibalism vs John writing this specifically). John could've written something to defend Christians against what the government and popular opinion were accusing them of. But instead John took careful time to write this *specific* teaching of Jesus. Clearly John did this on purpose, because the truth is that the words of Jesus are all very confrontational to us; they challenge our ways of thinking and force us to either accept the transformational truth of them, or reject them.

As you heard in the passage we read, some of the disciples and the religious leaders were having a hard time with what Jesus was saying, and they were rejecting it.

The Scripture we read is from a larger section of teaching that Jesus was having with them. Jesus and his disciples were walking through the area of Galilee. Word had been spreading about Jesus and the crowd was huge and was growing. People had heard about Jesus' teaching and his miracles so they went to check him out themselves (they couldn't exactly watch clips of Jesus on TicToc).

The crowd included the Twelve disciples, but there was a larger group of disciples too. Then there was an even larger crowd that included the curious, along with the Jewish religious leaders who were very suspicious. Some of them were serious followers, some were hangers-on, some were there for the show, and some were there to find reason to get rid of him. Jesus knew that he needed to make it clear that what he'd come to give us was an entirely new and different kind of life, but that it would take a total commitment from us. So in chapter six we see Jesus doing and saying things to help them understand who he is. First was the miracle of feeding the five thousand people from just a few fish and a few loaves of bread. Then came the evening when Jesus walked on the water. Big stuff, and the crowds are getting huge to see the show.

But Jesus knew that the people were following him for the entertainment value or for what they could get from him – they had no plans of living a surrendered life, so the miracles set up a perfect “teachable moment.” Jesus begins teaching them that he is the bread of life.

What did that mean? Let me connect a couple of dots before we move on. First look at the beginning of John's gospel and how he describes Jesus:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1, niv)

There is a lot of profound stuff in that one sentence, but most clearly: Jesus is the very word, the very proclamation, the very power of God in a person. Jesus is everything God would say and do. Jesus is the Word of God. Got that?

Okay, now we need to go back to the story of Jesus' temptation by Satan at the end of his forty days of fasting in the wilderness. That event happened right between Jesus

being baptized by John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus public ministry. You can find it in Matthew chapter four. There we're told:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:1-4, niv)

The very first temptation Jesus faced was to turn stone to bread. Of course, Jesus was very hungry, so it was a real temptation. It also would solve so many hunger problems for people who were starving. But Jesus said that we don't live by bread alone, but by every word that God speaks. And who is every word that God speaks? Jesus.

So the metaphor of Jesus being the bread of life begins to make sense: more important than physical bread is that we live on and consume God's Word. And Jesus is God's Word.

But the crowd isn't getting it. In fact, they are beginning to get offended by it, because they realize that Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah. So Jesus ramps up the metaphor in order to really shake them up and wake them up. He goes from "I am the bread of life" to "you must eat my flesh and drink my blood." Now they are coming unglued.

And that gets us to the passage that we read earlier.

Jesus says something incredibly dramatic, which is that we need to...

Devour Jesus.

Look at that phrase: devour Jesus. It just doesn't sound right, does it? And that's the point – it's meant to shock us so that we look for the deeper meaning.

Jesus starts off by telling us that it is his flesh that will give us life, because he would give it for us. We need to remember what it sounded like to those listeners; we know that when Jesus says he will give his life for us, it means he will die on the cross for us. But for them, it sounded like Jesus said, "I will serve up myself for you to eat." This was incredibly offensive for the Jews especially, which were the majority of the people in the crowd. The Old Testament was very clear about this – including being forbidden from consuming blood (Leviticus 26:29, Jeremiah 19:9, Leviticus 17:10-14).

When we pastored the church in Mountain Home, ID, we had a lot of Basque friends, including our next-door neighbor. I was privileged to go back and do the weddings of their son and their daughter. Basque people are from a region in Spain, and the Mountain Home area has the largest concentration outside of Spain. They settled in the area in the late 1800s and became shepherders. So every year they have Basque festivals, and one of the things they do is they make and eat blood sausage. They take meat, fat, and blood, mix it together so the blood can coagulate and stuff it

in a sausage. It tastes as bad as it sounds. I guess it's an acquired taste. I tried it once and immediately understood why God said we shouldn't eat it! Do we have any Basque folks here? I'm sorry; I don't mean to say bad things. Every culture has something horrible that they eat. Blood sausage is yours. Taco Bell is ours.

But God didn't forbid eating blood because of the taste. The blood was the life, and it was a sacred thing. For the Jews to do so was sacrilegious to life itself.

Of course, Jesus was using an extreme, hyperbolic metaphor to make a point, but the people missed it because they took it literally. It's the same thing that Nicodemus did when Jesus told him that he must be born a second time. Remember that in John 3? Nicodemus said, "How can I climb back into my mother's womb and be born again?" He missed the point of the deeper truth because he took it literally.

Let me just interject something here: be careful about reading some things in the Bible too literally. We are not fundamentalists; we don't do that. If you do, you run the risk of missing the deeper truth. We must recognize when Scripture intends to be metaphorical in order to teach a deeper meaning – like Jesus was doing here. The Bible is all true, but not all of it is literal.

The point Jesus was making here is that to...

Devour Jesus means we **follow him to death.**

Jesus was making a serious, serious point here. Don't make the mistake of thinking he was just foreshadowing what our communion ritual would be.

One of the things Jesus was saying is that we must totally and completely grab hold and never let go of the truth that he is God with flesh and bone; that he is God, and he is one of us.

And because he is flesh and blood, Jesus was making the point of what I said earlier – remember that the blood stands for life. To the Jew, all blood belonged to God. In Jesus' case, it is God's blood. So Jesus was saying, "You must drink my blood – you must take my life into the very center of your being. That life of mine is the life of God himself. It belongs to God and is God."

So "eating" or devouring Jesus was a metaphor for a literal spiritual truth about "remaining" in Jesus. This is exactly what Pastor Div preached about last week in that passage in John 15 about remaining in Jesus because with Jesus I can, but without Jesus I can't.

Jesus is telling us that this is abiding in, remaining in, persevering in Jesus. It is a total identification to Jesus, and it is *essential to discipleship*.

Devouring Jesus was directly tied to his crucifixion and death. So this was a *striking* way to describe what it means for us to follow Jesus. This is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he said this:

Then he (Jesus) called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take

up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”
(Mark 8:34-35, niv)

To devour Jesus means that we are so identified with him, so committed to him, so devoted to him, that we give up our very lives to follow him. He comes first in *everything*.

So yes, Jesus was intentionally pointing us to our communion ritual, but it has *never* been just about a ritual! Communion has always been a way for us to say in a very physical way that we will devour everything about Jesus and follow him in every way.

This bread and this juice is not really Jesus’ body and blood. It isn’t somehow magically Jesus’ body and blood. It is our commitment to have his life blood flowing through our veins. But let me tell you, it is real when it flows FROM our veins; it is real when we are so filled with the character and nature of Jesus that it oozes out of us – even to the point of death.

I don’t know if you noticed this when you are reading John’s Gospel, but John does not record what happened in the upper room; John does not record the last supper. *This* passage is about as close as it gets, and it is essentially a giant picnic on a hillside on the shores of the blue waters of the Sea of Galilee.

That’s because he’s telling us that we are to...

Devour Jesus for life.

Yes, we ingest the very life blood of God. Just like we eat and drink, and it gets absorbed into our bodies; we are to devour Jesus so that he infuses and fills us with his life. So the ritual represents that truth and declares that truth and facilitates that truth in our lives. We do it because we want and need his life in us. But there’s something else John is telling us with this eucharistic picnic: when we devour Jesus, *every meal becomes a sacrament. Every part of our lives becomes a sacrament.*

What we are doing when we go about life as a Christian is a sacred thing. It connects us in a supernatural way to the presence of Christ in all of our life. You know what supernatural means, don’t you? It doesn’t mean like a ghost that maybe you believe or maybe you don’t; it’s not something that is maybe natural, but we just don’t know. It means a real thing that is even greater than our natural world.

Communion is a declaration that the supernatural lives in our natural state – that Jesus himself – the bread and life blood of God is in every fiber and synapse and neuron and molecule of our identity. Every moment is filled with the presence of Christ for those who have him in them.

The body and blood of Jesus is not limited to a liturgical, ritual event. It fills us. We devour him.

Christianity would be a poor thing if Christ were confined to rituals and church and gatherings. He is everywhere you go and with everyone you encounter. And

because you have devoured him, you take Jesus to all the places you go and to all the people you meet.

What we are about to do is way more than ritual. This is the body and the blood of Jesus, and we are about to eat it and drink it. We want every last morsel and molecule of him.

(Fill us Jesus, in what we are about to do).

This Communion was instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is a sacrament, which proclaims His life, His sufferings, His sacrificial death, and resurrection, and the hope of His coming again. It is a declaration of his death that will continue until he returns.

This is a means of grace in which Christ is present by the Spirit. We need to receive it reverently and gratefully for the work of Christ.

This is a real declaration that can only be made by believers in Jesus and followers of his, because we know and live the truth of it. You do not need to be a member of this church to join us in this.

If you are not a believer, this won't be anything more to you than stale, tasteless bread and warm juice. BUT: it could be that today; this act means you choose to be a follower of Jesus. That you realize he is God, that he died for you, and that you will leave your old life and the sin of your past and you will devour Jesus. If that is you, start praying now. Start talking to Jesus now and give your life to him, and then you can devour Jesus with us in just a moment.

Serve, pray as you wait, and we'll take it together.

We come to the table that we may be renewed in life and salvation and be made one by the Spirit.

In unity with the Church, we confess our faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. (Say that with me)

So we pray:

Holy God, we gather at this, your table, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who by your Spirit was anointed to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, set at liberty those who are oppressed. Christ healed the sick, fed the hungry, ate with sinners, and established the new covenant for forgiveness of sins. We live in the hope of His coming again. And so, we gather as the Body of Christ to offer ourselves to you in praise and thanksgiving. Pour out your Holy Spirit on us and on these your gifts. Make them by the power of your Spirit to be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the Body of Christ, redeemed by His blood. By your Spirit make us one in Christ, one with each other, and one in the ministry of Christ to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Amen

On the night in which Jesus was betrayed, He took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, gave it to His disciples, and said: "This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)

The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, broken for you, preserve you blameless to everlasting life. Eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and be thankful. Take and eat the bread, the body of Jesus. Likewise, when the supper was over, He took the cup, gave thanks, gave it to His disciples, and said: "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me." (Matthew 26:27-29)

The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, shed for you, preserve you blameless to everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and be thankful. Take and drink the blood of Jesus.

My friends: remember the truth Jesus taught at that lakeside picnic: devour Jesus daily so that all you are is Jesus in you, and go from this place to make every moment, every event, every encounter with another person a sacred moment.