



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Blood and Guts

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 16, 2015
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on John 6:51-58*

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

The bald fact of the matter is that in this Gospel reading Jesus talks about “drinking blood” multiple times. And I just can’t pass over this as if there were nothing peculiar going on. Or, at least I would regret having you leave here thinking that we don’t notice how disturbing this imagery is. Or, perhaps you might think we were clandestine vampires or cannibals? Or, perhaps worst of all, you might think we just parrot what we are told in an unreflective haze. No, I have to talk about this. And so let me trigger warn you that the imagery may be graphic.

Please understand my reticence. Blood and I are not the best of friends. My first memory of blood is not a scrape or a boo-boo. No. My first memory of blood is the horror of going to the doctor’s office as a child, knowing that, against my will, some of it would be taken from me. I would ruminate on it for days before the appointment, thinking of that machine that Dr. Freeman used. It was a blue device no bigger than a tape measure. You would have to place your finger underneath it, fully knowing what was coming. Time would expand into a cavern of ticking dread. And then crack! A needle would snap down onto your finger and right back again. If you blinked, you missed it. And your finger would be sparking with pain, and upon it would be a bead of blood cropping up on the tip, like a single berry. And they would take the blood with a vial. And that was that. Until the next visit to Dr. Freeman, when we’d have to do it all over again.

Overtime, unfortunately, I developed a “condition.” The fancy word was “vasovagal syncope.” But the real phrase was “guy who faints when he gets a shot.” I’m sort of over it now. But I still don’t like it. My body, at a visceral level, still doesn’t get that when blood is extracted from me at a doctor’s office, this is meant to help me, not to hurt me. Blood, in that setting, is lost for the sake of healing. With the doctor, blood isn’t a sign of death; it is a sign of life.

But even when you know this in your head, blood is not pleasant, even when Jesus himself talks about it. This is part of my reticence, too. I’m preaching on one of the most unsuccessful sermons of Jesus’ ministry. At the end of this particular sermon, given in a synagogue in Capernaum, many of his disciples said that what he was saying was too hard of a teaching to bear. And I think this is putting it kindly. Not only was so much of what Jesus said that day disturbing, but this particular point about blood seemed to fly in the face of what the Torah teaches: that one is forbidden from drinking blood in any meal (Deut. 12:16). And so, not just “some” but “many” of Jesus’ followers up and leave him, to follow him no more. But, gratefully, the Twelve, the core, they stay. And Peter, speaking for the group, famously says, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the Words of Eternal Life.”

Thank goodness that they stayed, that they had the tenacity to stick with Jesus when he became generally unpalatable, that they were willing, in trust and devotion, to push through that envelope of disgust to perceive what was on the other side of this hard teaching. Because Jesus was using his words to talk about spiritual realities. When he said, “Eat my flesh and drink my blood,” he was not

asking them to act out some horror show. He was giving them a way to consider his life as a source of life for them. That just as they take in food and drink, and it becomes who they are, they are meant to take in his spirit and his presence and his wisdom and take it all in, not just in their hearts or minds, but also into their guts, so that it might make in them a spring of Life. And not just any life. But the kind of life that lasts. The kind of life that fear and disgust and even death can't kill. We call it Eternal Life.

Jesus is trying to get them ready for what is coming. And if they only look at the surface of things they will miss it, even if it is right in front of their faces. They have to undergo some spiritual pre-digestion if they are going to take it in properly. And so, like a mother bird, Jesus prepares this hard food for his growing disciples in their nest. He hasn't even started to teach that he must die, which is going to cause howls of protest from Peter. Here he is just beginning to approach the conviction that his being living bread may be about something that is bigger than his own life. His being living bread is going to mean that he is murdered, that he is devoured by the Romans and his own people in one of the most ugly ways imaginable, but it won't have been for nothing. It will have been for the sake of opening up a path to a larger life, Eternal Life, prepared for the whole world.

A lot is at stake for the disciples' understanding this process sooner rather than later, for they too will be called to lose a lot so that others might find that same Eternal Life that they found in Jesus. The twelve disciples are going to initiate a legacy of New Life that is going to be made manifest across the entire planet, even unto our time and upon these shores. One aspect of that legacy is that we share a meal together. And if we looked at it on the surface, we'd hardly think it would be worth anything. Such a tiny portion! And we'd hardly think that the bread and the wine would be appetizing, given what we call it. And yet it still draws us into deep spiritual undercurrents with tectonic power. We share the bread together and name it Christ's body so that we might be Christ's body in the world, alive. We share wine together and declare it Christ's blood so that same life may flow through the chambers of our hearts.

The Body and the Blood is not the grim re-enactment of a murder scene, although it alludes to one. It is not some vestige of primitive religion that we do because we've always done it. In fact, it is a reversal of old sacrificial religion. Instead of people sacrificing to the gods, it is God offering God's self to people. The Body and the Blood is the entire Gift of God, which is light and life and love, the kind that conquers the sting of death and the terror of the grave. It is the entire Gift of God placed right at the center of our being.

This is God's Way: God gives life away so that we might have more life, and in turn give our lives away: the body, the blood, the kitchen sink, the whole kit n' caboodle, so that others might have life in even more fullness. And this full life is lived out in a certain Way.

Instead of taking and keeping score, we are giving and forgiving. Instead of strategizing how to get more, we strategize how to have less in ways that will give us more unto eternity. This is why we come to church, to unearth these lasting things, lasting life that has always been there for us.

But still there remains the icky blood imagery. Yet, can we also place it alongside all of the others in John's Gospel? Christ is the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Door of the Sheep, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Resurrection, the Way and the Truth and the Life. The Blood is there, too. Not to emphasize the loss of life, but to keep us in mind of the circulating power of the blood stream. Oxygen and energy are sent to every cell of the body. And like the bloodstream, God in Christ circulates holy energy to all of the parts of God's creation, every creature in it.

But even after all this, the "eating of the flesh and the drinking of the blood" is still a stumbling block to many. It might not be the best image to use beyond those doors, no matter what I might say. And so, I think it would be just fine, for those scandalized by such talk, if we substituted another more contemporary image. If there had been such a practice in Jesus' lifetime, I bet he would have used this image. Rather than eating, how about transplanting? For Jesus is the great organ donor. His

body's loss is your body's gain. And he wants to give you his eyes, so that you might see with God's insight. His hands so that you may heal as God heals. His heart so that you may love and live afresh, with God's highest hope at your center. And rather than drinking, how about a transfusion? For Jesus is the great blood donor. His loss is your gain. And there's a cavernous blood bank, waiting on hand with pint after pint, in every blood type, ready to be transfused into your bodies, so that not just a part of you, but all of you might be energized and renewed by the Life of God on Earth as it is in Heaven.

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