



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**

*The Episcopal Church  
in Destin, Florida*

**THE THIRTHEENTH  
SUNDAY AFTER  
PENTECOST**

**AUGUST 18, 2024**

**A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham**

It is tempting to place what Jesus said in the Gospel according to John this morning in the context of the Holy Eucharist. Eat my flesh. Drink my blood. When we gather at the table, when we assemble at the communion rail, we receive in the outward signs of bread and wine, the inward and spiritual grace of the body and blood of Christ, given to us and received by faith. We might call it miraculous. We might call it a mystery. But in an act of faith, we extend our hands, we take the cup, because we know Jesus Christ is really present, and we are graced in unimaginable ways. But let's take the Holy Eucharist off the table, so to speak, in figuring out what Jesus meant in this morning's reading from the Gospel according to John. When we see what Jesus was getting at, we will see that much more than the liturgical act of the Holy Eucharist is involved.

Jesus was speaking in terms that were understood much differently in a time and culture 2000 years remote from 21<sup>st</sup> century western civilization – and likely eastern civilization, as well. If we listen with the ears of the Jewish audience for Jesus and John, we must import their notion of the meaning of flesh. If we listen with the ears of the Jewish audience for Jesus and John, we must their understanding of the meaning of blood.

And we even must grasp the meaning of eat in a broader sense. When we eat, we consume. reject the non-nutritious. We become stronger. And in some small way we are changed.

A few months back, Jo mentioned the story of Craig Kanalley, who upon changing jobs decided to read the entire Bible in 100 days – which he did. In reporting his experience, he said that “Nearly everything around me seemed to take on great meaning, spiritual meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Many of us could say that about a book we read, or play or motion picture or television show we viewed, or a great or not so great work of art that caught our eye or music that graced our ears. Or just the ephemeral beauty of nature. As Jesus told Gabriel Bossis, ““My sunsets are also My love. So few of My children look

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Kanalley: “How Reading the Bible in 100 Days Changed My Life,” *new technology*, June 20, 2012, <https://new-tv-technology.blogspot.com/2012/06/craig-kanalley-how-reading-bible-in-100.html> (accessed August 14, 2024).

at them to praise Me . . . and yet My love is there.”<sup>2</sup> In a sense we digest new facts and thoughts and understandings and insights, we absorb visions and sounds of beauty, and we are changed. We are in some small or large way transformed. So what does Jesus want us to consume, to take in, to engage and process and open ourselves to being transformed?

His flesh and his blood. Certainly, we know that the Holy Eucharist can be transformative. But his hearers in the first century knew nothing of the Holy Eucharist. So what did they think Jesus meant? And what does that tell us?

First, in telling his audience to eat his flesh, Jesus meant to take in his humanity. That’s what his hearers would have understood. Have you seen the commercials on television that end with “Jesus Gets Us?” Jesus “gets us” because Jesus has lived the same life as a human being that we live.

He had good days and bad. He had moments of great joy and moments of profound grief. He needed to rest. He needed to pray. He had a job to do, and he was surrounded by sceptics and doubters and questioners and outright enemies, to say nothing of devoted followers who just never seemed to get it, a family that thought he was nuts, and the dearest of friends who would deny, desert, and betray him. Yes, Jesus gets us. But more to the point, Jesus as the heart and mind of God, becomes a person who shows us how to respond to and cope with life with all its chances and changes and distractions and disappointments, even despair and death, none of which was foreign to Jesus.

When we take in and process and absorb the reality of Jesus’ humanity, we are strengthened and fortified, we are sanctified, even deified. We become the children of God, the imitations of Christ, the images of God that have been created to be.

This thought is reinforced by the notion of taking in Jesus’ blood, because to his first century audience, blood was synonymous with life, and blood belonged to God. Life belongs to God. Jesus wants us to realize that our lives belong to God. Jesus wants us to take his life into the very core of our existence.

This is much more than any sort of historical or theological study or reflection on Jesus. All our book learning keeps Jesus at arm’s length. This is not to say Bible studies are worthless. But they lack that critical dimension

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<sup>2</sup> Gabrielle Bossis, *He and I*, tr. Evelyn M. Brown (Sherbrooke: Mediaspaul, 1985) 40.

of taking Jesus into our hearts. That's why Jesus says eat my flesh. Drink my blood. Take in my humanity. Meld my life, God's life, with yours.

That John placed Jesus' message to eat his flesh and drink his blood not in the context of the Last Supper, but in the context of picnic meal on a hillside, shows a much more expansive understanding of the real presence of Christ in the world.

Yes, there is something special about gathering at table for the Holy Eucharist. But access to the real presence of the Jesus who wants to share our humanity and enter deeply into our hearts can happen and does happen in the world outside the doors of our church. It does not require a correct liturgical service. It does not require a church and an altar. This is no negation of the sacrament. It is simply a recognition that we can gather in a palatial restaurant, a thatch hut, or in field beneath blue skies, and find Christ's presence real and palpable and transforming. Jesus never confined himself to the synagogue. And we should never confine Jesus to the sanctuary.

That's what John wants us to understand about Jesus. He is genuinely present for us everywhere. He is yearning to show us the way. He is yearning to plunge to the depths of our being. He is yearning to abide in us as we abide in him. All we need do is open the door to our hearts.