

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Old Testament people were not repulsed by blood as modern people are today. They were used to the slaughter of animals for offerings to God. There was no objection heard to the blood, not even when *“Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’”*

Surely this was so in Jesus' day, too. Jewish pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem for the Passover, including the slaughter of the Passover lamb. It was a bloody affair. In fact, there were so many lambs slaughtered — as many as 250,000 in Jesus' day, Josephus said — that the brook Kidron *“ran red with the blood of the lambs.”*

Still the eating or drinking of blood was strictly forbidden God's people. Long before Moses, God commanded Noah: *“you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood”* (Gen. 9:4); and through Moses, the Lord codified it: *“you shall eat no blood whatever, whether of fowl or of animal, in any of your dwelling places. Whoever eats any blood, that person shall be cut off from his people”* (Lev. 7:26-7). The Lord told the people, *“the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life”* (Lev. 17:11).

That's why Jesus' teaching in Capernaum was so shocking even to some of Jesus' disciples. As Jesus was teaching the people of Himself as the Bread of Life, come down from heaven, He then said to them, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day”* (John 6:53-54). What? Drink your blood? That's why many of them objected, saying, *“This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”* And then *“many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him”* (John 6:60, 66).

On the other hand, those who stayed had come to realize that Jesus was *“the Holy One of God”* (John 6:69), and that His were *“the words of eternal life”* (John 6:68). They knew they needed to pay attention to His words — and so do we, especially as Jesus speaks to us in the Gospel, instituting what we learn as the Sacrament of the Altar.

For there in that upper room, with Jesus celebrating the Passover meal with His disciples, He gave to His church a holy thing that we might take and receive Christ's own body given unto death on the cross, and drink His blood poured out there.

His are “*the words of eternal life*”; “*whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.*” Jesus had been preparing the disciples for this night when He said, “*Take; this is my body.*” And again, after they had drunk from the cup, He said, “*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.*”

Surely, not just modern people find these words “*a hard saying.*” So also did some of the more radical reformers of Luther’s day. You can read a bit about them in your “What Luther says” insert: Zwingli and Oecolampadius. They would not receive Jesus’ words as He spoke them, but had to twist them to their own unbloody sensibilities, and they accused Luther and the Lutherans of being cannibalistic for taking Jesus at His word. Indeed, Lutherans are accused of this “monstrous doctrine” (CP Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Doctrine*,” IV:II) to this day.

Thus, Zwingli said, “is” does not mean “is” here; it means “represents.” Jesus didn’t say it on this night of His betrayal, when He was giving the church His “last will and testament,” said Zwingli, but He meant it: “This ‘represents’ my body.” Oecolampadius was not quite as crass, but he comes out in the same place. “Is” meant “is” to him, but “body” didn’t mean “body,” but “a symbol of my body.” And by these words, they would tear Jesus out of the Supper and leave their followers with a graceless meal, changing it from that which Jesus instituted for His church, namely, to eat and drink His body and blood “given and shed for [us] for the forgiveness of sins,” changing it to something they concocted out of their uneasiness.

With all of their attempts to convince Luther of the correctness of their twisted interpretations, Luther would have none of it, and neither should we. Luther grasped tightly to Jesus’ clear words, especially to that little word “is.” Jesus knew how to use figurative language; many times He had likened the kingdom of God to other things in parables. But not this time; not at such a deadly serious time. Jesus was explicit: “*This is my body*”; “*This is my blood.*”

We likewise should hang on to these words, for they make the difference between a Sacrament administered according to Christ’s institution with all of its attendant grace and a mere memorial meal. Indeed, this is what we confess the Sacrament of the Altar is: “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.” Yes, there are bread and wine in the Supper, a “*participation*” or communion with the body and blood of Christ, but the thirsty man does not concern himself with whether he is drinking from a glass, a canteen, or a hose. The important thing is the water that slakes his thirst. The important thing in the Supper

is the body and blood of Christ that satisfies our hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

So, we also confess that “These words, ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,’ show us that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” And we also confess, that when we trust in Jesus’ words — His instituting words, and the words “given and shed for you,” we receive what they say: His body, His blood, forgiveness, life, and salvation, the fruit of Christ’s bloody atonement for us.

And so, we are here tonight to partake of this Supper instituted for us on the night of our Lord Jesus Christ’s betrayal, as we do every Lord’s Day. We’re here to eat His body, and to say, “Amen,” “yes, yes, it shall be so”; and again to drink His blood, poured out for you, and to say, “Amen,” we believe it. We poor sinners are here to affirm the important things in the Supper Christ gave us: His body and His blood, here according to His word, here to forgive sins and give life. Lord, as we partake, grant it to us as we believe.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.