

JOHN 6.51-58.  
AN EXPOSITION FOR THE  
THIRTEENTH SUNDAY  
AFTER PENTECOST 2003  
*“Medicine of Immortality”*

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Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The reading that we will look at more closely today is from the Gospel lesson in which we are told that Jesus said, *“I am the Living Bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of **this** Bread, he will live forever; and the Bread that I shall give is My Flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”*

These words of Jesus are very familiar to anyone who has even the slightest knowledge of Holy Scripture. But these words are also, perhaps, some of the most difficult for us to understand of any Jesus ever spoke.

I think it’s safe to conclude that what our Lord Jesus is saying to us here in His “Bread of Life” sermon is pushing us much further, much deeper, and challenging our comprehension more completely than anything else He’s said up to this point.

But Jesus never backed down just because people were grumbling at His words. He didn’t feel it necessary to modify His speech so people wouldn’t be offended by it.

Jesus refused to bend His words even if to meet people “where they were.” Instead He pushed and pressed them even further – so that *they* might come to where **He** was.

**This** Bread of Life, you see, **this** Living Bread come down from heaven – which a person may eat of and live forever – is no ordinary food. **This** Living Bread is Jesus’ own flesh – His humanity – conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and nailed to a cross for the life of the world.

At **these** words, the grumbling over what Jesus had said before now turned into a full-blown argument. People were shocked, and they shouted out: “Has He lost His mind? What on earth could He be speaking about?” Surely, they all thought, Jesus was speaking “spiritually,” “figuratively,” or “parabolically.” After all, *how* could He give us His flesh for His followers to eat?

But Jesus never answers their question – for, in fact, there is no answer to the question of “how” – no matter how many times people might ask it. Indeed, if you try to answer the question, “How can Jesus give His followers His flesh to eat?” you’ll come up with the wrong answer **every single time** – for the fact of the matter is that He’s the Lord. He can do **whatever** He wants – and He can do it **however** He wishes.

So, instead of explaining how this might be, Jesus simply turns up the volume a bit more. He becomes more emphatic. “Most assuredly,” He says (or, as another translation puts it, “I guarantee this” – “I’m telling you the truth”), “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.”

Unbelief, of course, says, “No, this cannot be. No one can do such a thing as this.” It should come as no surprise that many who previously followed Jesus soon gave up their allegiance to Him after hearing this sermon. Scripture says they turned away and no longer followed Him at all. Why? Because **these** words were too hard for them to hear – too demanding, and too difficult. It’s recorded that even His closest disciples were disturbed and shaken by what He said. How many people today – upon hearing the Biblical teaching concerning the Lord’s Supper – still turn away from it and believe what they want to believe?

Christ’s words, you see, are offensive to human reason. But we don’t need to ask, “How can He give us His flesh to eat and His blood to drink?” After all, we know **how** Jesus did what He did on the night of the Passover – on the night in which He was betrayed, arrested, and led away to be put to death on the cross.

On that night He gave thanks, broke bread, and spoke those amazing words that are still used today in the celebration of the Eucharist: “Take, eat, this is My body, given for you.” On that same night He also took the cup of wine after everyone had eaten, He offered up thanks, then

gave it to His disciples, saying: “Take, drink, this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed **for you**, for the forgiveness of your sins.”

According to Christ’s very own last will and testament, then, His flesh **is** true food, and His blood **is** true drink. The very same flesh and blood which was given and shed in sacrifice on Calvary’s cross, is the very same flesh and blood He now gives to His Church – to us – as a feast of everlasting life.

Even today, whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus – trusting explicitly in His gracious Word and Promise – receives what this feast is intended by our Lord to deliver – the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

The mouth receives the food and the drink; but faith draws on its benefits. Perhaps you might recall how, in the book of Leviticus, sacrifices were continually being offered to God for the sins of the people – including “peace” – or “communion” – sacrifices. When these sacrifices were offered up, flesh and blood would be separated. The blood would be poured out onto the altar, while the flesh of the sacrifice would be burned as an of-

fering to the Lord – and a portion reserved as a *meal to be eaten by the priests in the presence of God*.

This meal was communion with God and communion with one another. Today, the Lord's Supper stands as a *fulfillment of those Old Testament Communion Sacrifices* – only now the sacrifice has already been accomplished once and for all by Jesus' death on the cross for sinners.

He's become our Substitute, or Sacrifice – the vicarious Victim for our sin. There on that cross His blood was shed to make atonement – to pay the price of our rebellion – and to make peace between God and us. Now that all that's been accomplished, Christ's words take on added meaning.

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day,” Jesus says. That's why the Early Church often spoke lovingly of the Lord's Supper as the “**medicine of immortality**.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Stand fast, brethren, in the faith of Jesus Christ, and in His love, in His passion, and in His resurrection. Do ye all come together in common, and individually, through grace, in one faith of God the Father, and of Jesus Christ His only-begotten Son, and ‘the first-born of every creature,’ but of the seed of David according to the flesh, being under the guidance of the Comforter, in obedience to the bishop and the presbytery with an undivided mind, breaking one and the same bread, which is the **medicine of immortality**, and the antidote which prevents us from dying, but a cleansing remedy driving away evil, [which causes] that we should live in God through Jesus Christ.” — Ignatius to the Ephesians XX

They rightly saw Christ's body and blood as the antidote to sin and death – as a food that unleashed the energies of Jesus' atoning work against the sin and death that weighs us down. Dr. Martin Luther wrote about this in his *Large Catechism* when he said:

“We must never regard the Sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body has benefited also.

In Martin Luther's day, for the first time in centuries, the communion cup of Christ's Blood was offered to people in Lutheran congregations as well as the Body of Christ. “Communion in both kinds” it was called. It was communion as Christ intended when He passed the cup that night to His disciples when He instituted the Holy Sacrament.

The Roman Church had suspended such communion and only the priests drank from the cup, lest the blood of Christ be spilled by accident. Ever since the Reformation, Lutheran Christians have rejoiced to receive the cup of Christ's blood as well as the bread that is His Body.

I will always remember how, when I worked briefly among African Lutherans in Sudan, they cherished Holy Communion. In a land where many feared disease and death, they did not hesitate to share the common cup that they knew Christ had given for our good, our forgiveness and our healing.

When, afterwards, I told the African Bishop that many Lutherans in America would have refused to take part in such a Service because they prefer individual glasses, for reasons of hygiene, he was quite mystified. "How could believing communicants fear that a cup would harm them, that Jesus Christ Himself was offering for their soul's salvation and healing? Do they believe it is Christ's blood or don't they, he asked?" I knew I should say "yes, they do believe its Christ's blood", but I was at a loss to explain why so many Lutheran Christians in America were afraid to drink from Christ's common cup.

It may interest you to know that, in other parts of the world, such as Europe, all churches that believe Christ offers His Blood in the Sacrament use only the common cup. The only churches that use individual glasses for communion are those churches that refuse to use wine and/or refuse to believe that Christ offers His Blood in the Sacrament.

Now, those of you who prefer to be offered your own individual glass for communion, I don't know why you want to do that. I am not going to jump to conclusions or even guess. But I am going to say, let none of us who is coming to receive this Sacrament rightly, fear that what Christ gives us for our good could harm us in any way. Live no longer in the darkness of your own imagination, but walk instead in the way of understanding. For the believer - the Sacrament of the Altar is the Medicine of Immortality - nothing less than the holiest and most perfect thing that could ever touch your lips in this life.

Of course, it is true that those who despise the Sacrament and lead unchristian lives receive it to their condemnation. To such people nothing can be good or wholesome, just as when a sick person willfully eats and drinks what is forbidden him by the physician.

But those who feel their weakness, who are anxious to be rid of it and desire help, should regard and use the Sacrament as a precious antidote against the poison in their systems. For here in the Sacrament you receive what the Great Physician Himself has prescribed for the forgiveness of sins. This sacrament contains and conveys God's grace and Spirit with all His gifts, protection, defense, and power against death and the devil and all evils." (LC V.68-70)

Take this, if you really want to live. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith unto life everlasting. Amen.