

Zombie, Vampire, or Christian?

The Rev. Karen Swanson

Four or five years ago I visited Minneapolis, Minnesota to see a childhood friend. As we walked through among the buildings of downtown Minneapolis, we kept running into people covered in thin, torn filaments of clothing with greenish skin and hair, sometimes completed with a mask featuring large teeth and dripping blood. At first, I thought perhaps we were just bumping into the sometimes unusual people who inhabit the streets of a major, metropolitan area. But as we ran into more and more of these people, I was completely puzzled, and turned to my buddy. "It's Zombie night" she explained. "Drinks and food are discounted for those in Zombie costumes." Unfamiliar with this cultural phenomena, I was taken aback. What seemed like a whole city was full of people dressed as otherworldly creatures who liked to eat brains and slurp up blood.

In studying the reading from the Gospel of John this week, I have wondered how those unfamiliar with Christianity hear Jesus' words today: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." To the uninitiated, are these words shocking? Eerie? Unreal? As strange as the Zombies wandering through Minneapolis were to me? Think of it. On the

surface, these words seem to encourage us to behave like zombies or vampires or cannibals. We are so accustomed to these words that they fail to have much of an impact on us.

“Eat my flesh, drink my blood, and have eternal life.” These words did shake up Jesus’ followers. In fact, almost all of the people in the crowds who had gathered to hear Jesus preach, and most of the 5,000 whom he had fed with the little boy’s loaves of barley bread and fish, left him after this teaching, according to the Gospel of John. The whole idea was off-putting. In Jewish understanding, the life of an animal or person was carried in the blood. When an animal was sacrificed, its blood was separately collected and thrown on the altar because it was sacred. To eat meat with blood still in it was strictly forbidden. To drink it was inconceivable. This drinking of blood and eating of flesh seemed blasphemous. It brought God down from heaven to earth with an outrageous thud.

Pastor Martin Copenhauer describes the reaction of a young girl in our time who heard a Eucharistic Prayer for the first time with its graphic words of institution: “Take eat. This is my body . . . drink this . . . this is my blood.”

“Eww, yuck!” she proclaimed in disgust.

Jesus makes no attempt to soften his command. To make his point even more clearly, he shifts in the middle of this passage from using a word that means “eat my flesh” to one the connotation of which is more like “gnaw on” or “chew on” my flesh.

What are we to make of all this? Of course, we can and rightfully do move on from the idea that Jesus means this literally. But, before we shake off this gripping metaphor, we ought to consider more deeply what it means. What does it mean that Jesus offers us his flesh to gnaw on, and his blood to drink? First of all, we connect this to the gift Jesus makes of himself on the cross. His flesh is stretched across the bar of the cross, and blood drips from his pained hands and feet and side. On the cross, Jesus gives all of who he is for God and for us. Because of his profound love, He holds nothing back.

Secondly, this metaphor invites us to take Jesus in, all of him. In the Hebrew language to speak of one’s flesh and blood is to speak of one’s whole self. Jesus invites us to fully take him into ourselves, to invite him into the depths of who we are, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Jesus encourages us to chew on his words, to digest his healing works, to absorb his love and goodness. Jesus offers to become part of our very being in the same way that the physical food we take in is incorporated into our body. Jesus wants to share

his healing love and profound goodness with us. He does this by giving us his Body and his Blood, the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Our culture would have us consume other things, good things, but things that by themselves give us only indigestion. We need food and clothes and shelter. The respect and appreciation of others are important to us. Yet a steady diet of striving for more and better material things, and the fickle admiration of others, leaves us longing for healthier food, spiritual food that nourishes our life with God. This food we can find in the bread and the wine, in the Body and Blood of Christ, and in the community, our church, in which these gifts are shared. So, you who are hungry and thirsty, come, eat and drink at the table of the Lord. All are welcome here.

In the Name of God: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Amen.