



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## The Transitive Property of Love: Part II: The Sacraments: Baptism and Communion

John 6:51-57

*Those words are most pleasant which give us new knowledge. Strange words have no meaning for us; common terms we know already; it is metaphor which gives us the most pleasure because we learn—and learn quickly—from it . . . The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor; it is a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in the dissimilar.—Aristotle*

*It is precisely through metaphor that our perspectives, or analogical extensions, are made—a world without metaphor would be a world without purpose.—Kenneth Burke*

Today is a singular day, a joyous day. Today, we get to celebrate both sacraments—baptism and the Lord's supper. So of course, I want to preach on the sacraments, but of course I also need to keep it short. So I'll read a short Scripture passage: the sixth chapter of John's Gospel verses 51-57.

In this passage, Jesus offers a metaphor. He says: "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." And like any good teacher or speaker, he develops the metaphor with vivid imagery: "unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you."

This puzzles many of his listeners. In fact, they seem to take his metaphor literally, and seem, well, a little grossed out by it. We'll not make the same mistake. We will take his metaphor metaphorically, which I'll try to explain . . . shortly. But first, listen to God's Word:

*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

*Many listening to him then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"*

*So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I abide in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me."*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

*It's just a metaphor.*

Yes—and LeBron is just a basketball player; Bach, just a composer; and Paris, just a city.

Metaphor is the quickest, most powerful, most direct way to get to the heart of the matter.

For now, I'll make no fine-grained distinctions between metaphor, simile, and analogy—I'm going to throw them all into same pot—I know this drives English teachers nuts—but I'm going to do it: all of them alike—metaphor, simile, and analogy—try to make the unfamiliar, familiar; the unknown, known; and do so by comparing two things that at first seem dissimilar.

*Love is a rose.* The rose being the more familiar, tangible and concrete; love less so. At first glance, well, what two things could seem more dissimilar?—but then again, when you think about it . . .

Or if the bloom is off that rose, try this one: *Old age is a withered stalk.* The withered stalk being the more familiar, tangible, and concrete; old age, less so. Two things that you might think dissimilar—a dried stem as the last remnant of a plant and a human being in the last period of his or her life,—what could they have in common?—but then again when you think about it, at least when you think about it once you've reached the ripe old age of . . . well, let's just leave it there (no development through vivid imagery, thank you very much), shall we?

And it's not just poetry: our everyday language is rife with metaphors, it's just that they've become so familiar—worn-out, if you will—that we hardly notice them: *the heart of the matter, a fine-grained distinction, throwing them all into the same pot, driving someone nuts, a ripe old age, a worn-out metaphor*—to name only a few—are perhaps all too familiar.

So the gift of metaphor is just that—a gift: to find the right one is to illuminate something in a striking way; to use the wrong one is to risk being banal, trite, clichéd, obscure, or even silly.

To paraphrase Mark Twain: the difference between the right metaphor and almost-the-right metaphor is really a large matter . . . it's the difference between lightning . . . and the lightning bug.

So now for the lightning:

*This is my body broken for you; this cup is the cup of the new covenant.*

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

The bread and the cup of the Lord's supper, the water of baptism—those are the more familiar, tangible and concrete things. You see them today. But they are meant to point to something, to illuminate something beyond themselves. But what?

A little more lightning:

*My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.*

*As we have been buried with Christ by baptism into his death, so too we are also raised from the dead with Christ to live in newness of life.*

Jesus' flesh and blood as true food and true drink, baptism as our dying and rising again with Christ—these too are metaphors meant to direct us to something beyond themselves, beyond ourselves. But what?

Life. Life in Jesus. Our new life in Jesus.

Listen to Jesus again:

*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I abide in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.*

Yes, they're metaphors, but that doesn't mean that they're not pointing to something real: Is love less real because in some mundane, flat-footed sense, it is not a rose? Old age less real, because, in a literal sense, it is not a withered stalk?

In fact, these metaphors—I mean, baptism and the Lord's Supper—not only illuminate the reality of our new life in Christ, they take us to that reality. They make it real for us.

The word "metaphor" means, at its root, to carry over or transfer something; at a literal level, the meaning of one word is carried over or transferred to another; but metaphorically (if you will) what is carried over, what is transferred, is *us*: we are transferred from our old lives to our new life in Christ. This of course is the work of the Holy Spirit. And this is the transitive property of love as expressed through the sacraments: through the work of the Holy Spirit, by way of baptism and the Lord's supper, we are carried into that new life. Love not only flows through us, it moves us, moves into communion with God and with one another. We abide in God and God abides in us.

Now, I could run a slew of Scripture passages by you, quote from any number of theologians, cite the Book of Confessions, even reference the Book of Order—all saying the same thing. But I don't need to. You've experienced this, you know what what this new life is like; you have been—you will be—partakers of the sacraments. And yet, for me at least, it's hard to put that experience into words. So, in trying to say what this new life in Christ is like, we turn—to what else?—metaphors.

So now for the lighting bugs:

What is the new life in Christ like? And to what should I compare it?

It's like those moments in a friendship, a true friendship, or in a family, a family at its best, when you feel that you belong here, here you can at last be your true self—the self you were meant to be precisely because you are part of something larger than yourself.

What is the new life in Christ like? And to what should I compare it?

It's like when you realize for the first time that there's so much more here—much more beauty, much more hope, much more joy, much more life than you ever before imagined, and even now can only begin to see, but you know that you are part of all that beauty, hope, joy, and life—forever.

What is the new life in Christ like? And to what should I compare it?

It is like the peace of knowing the you are loved—fully and forever. And the peace of knowing that you can—and do—love truly: love God, love our fellow humans, love all creation, and the life of all creation—more and more and more, forever.

I warned you: lightning bugs. But no matter: today is a singular day, a joyous day. Today, we get to celebrate both sacraments—baptism and the Lord's supper—and that's lightning enough.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen