

About a decade ago, in the time of our lives known as BC (before children), Ryan and I visited family in Southern California and we made a last minute decision to spend a day at Disney Land. It was was first visit to the Happiest Place on Earth; and the sounds, sights, and spectacle both delighted and overwhelmed my senses. Ryan turned to me and asked, “What ride do you want to do first?” My mind stopped. I had no idea. So I did what anyone does when faced when a tough choice: you stick with what you know. And what I knew were the two rides that everybody talks about when they talk about Disneyland: the Haunted Mansion and the Pirates of the Caribbean.

The Haunted Mansion is exactly what it sounds like, and is a very upscale version of your standard amusement park haunted house. Seated in your “doom buggy,” the ride takes you through a meandering journey through a house of playful haunts. Thanks to some special-effects wizardry, you are able to “see” ghosts dance, fly, and play through air. You even catch a few ghosts helping themselves at a lavish feast. As a parting gift, a hitchhiking ghost tags along in your buggy, promising to haunt you for the rest of your days.

I know it’s just a ride, not reality, but I delighted in finally living out a childhood fantasy of being in a house of friendly ghosts. There’s something comforting in thinking about the dead carrying on with the day-to-day activities of the living, something beautiful, even, in watching ghosts dance on the ceiling with an ethereal grace. And even though the ghosts weren’t real, it was like we were there with them, and they were there with us, and we existed together in some sort of supernatural community.

The Christian church has confessed in a “supernatural community,” of sorts—when we recite the Apostle’s Creed, for instance, we confess that we believe in the “communion of saints,” which is our way of saying we are connected by God to those living, dead, and yet to come. And when we celebrate Holy Communion, part of the Great Thanksgiving I recite before we partake of the bread and wine, is that we join our voices with believers of every time and place.

But I have to admit that this is one of the more mystical aspects of our faith. The Church Sanctuary is not a Haunted Mansion and there are no ghosts dancing around the hallways or singing in the choir. Yet, Jesus talks about “living bread,” “eating his flesh,” “drinking his blood,” “eternal life,” and to our ears, these words at first may conjure up images of haunted houses or the supernatural. We may find it curious, uncomfortable, or even offensive to hear Jesus command that we are to consume his very flesh and blood.

For the past few weeks, we have been in this same chapter of the Gospel of John [6th] and Jesus explains to his followers that, just as God once gave our ancestors manna in the desert, Jesus is the bread come down from heaven. But today’s lesson from John is the first time that Jesus has explicitly spoken about flesh and blood.

Throughout the centuries, the Christian church has engaged in many debates over the merit of Christ's flesh and blood—such as whether or not the wine and the bread actually become the body of Christ during Holy Communion. Regardless of your faith tradition, Holy Communion proclaims the impossible and the miraculous—that Christ is present with us when we eat the bread and drink the cup. In fact, in the Reformed tradition, there is an expectation that we will encounter the risen Lord when we hear the Word and celebrate the Sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper [W-1.3011(2)].

Yet this risen Lord we encounter is not a ghost that simply tags along for the ride, nor is it a spirit that playfully eats alongside us. Jesus is physically present with us, especially when we partake of Holy Communion. As Gail Ramshaw reminds us:

“It is almighty God whom we seek, whose presence we hunger and thirst for. In the life and deeds—yes, the body—of Jesus of Nazareth, we encounter that God. God calls us to the table and feeds us with food made possible only because of the death of Jesus, God's Son. For God could not eat with us were God the immortal essence of Greek philosophy. In Jesus, the incarnate God is among us.

But ‘This is my body’ means just as fully that in the gathered community is the Spirit of that Son. We, this community, this body of Christ, are the mystery of the Son of God in the midst of the world. We see the Spirit of God not in some puff of cloud hovering near the sun in the sky; we see that Spirit in the eyes and palms and lips of the faithful who come forward to eat and to drink. In the bread is the body of the Son, in the eating of the bread is the Spirit of God.”¹

If Jesus were just another Disneyland Ghost, then he would not be able to dine with us at the Lord's Table. Jesus would be just another intangible, supernatural being. We adhere to the basic tenet of our faith that God took on flesh and lived and dwelled among us. That's more than simply Jesus was born in a stable to Mary and Joseph. That means that, even after his resurrection and ascension, Jesus still lives and dwells and eats and drinks.

As another theologian points out, “The references to ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ are not meant to separate Jesus into distinct biological or spiritual entities, but the two taken together simply indicate the whole person. What Jesus gives in the Eucharist is not a supernatural substance, but himself.”² “In the communal action of eating and drinking, we internalize the living Christ, enjoying a communion, or *koinonia*, with him and the Father, in the Spirit.”³ Or, as St. Augustine reminds us, “You are what you have received.”⁴

¹ Ramshaw, 98.

² Ronald Byers, *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*, 273.

³ Byers, 273.

⁴ Gail Ramshaw, *Words Around the Table*, 95.

It is necessary for Christ to be fully present, as flesh and blood, when we receive communion because partaking of the bread and cup is our demonstrating of what it is to abide in Jesus. “We are what we have received.” Abiding in Jesus Christ is, essentially, to become one with Him, just as Christ becomes one with us. And maybe this is why we’d rather think of Christ as spiritually other—because if we think of him as a ghost or a disembodied spirit, then we release ourselves from the obligation of abiding in him. Because when we receive Christ into ourselves, we become like Christ. We know what happens to Christ. We know how Christ acts. We have seen what happens when we humble ourselves and love our enemies—the enemy tends to crucify us. Christ acknowledges that abiding with him is no day at the amusement park. But just as we abide in Christ, so does Christ abide in us. In our abiding with Christ, and Christ abiding with us, Jesus strengthens us, giving of his whole self, in order that we may live, not just for today, but eternally. Amen