

Reformation Sunday October 25, 2009 John 8:31-36 The Good Shepherd  
*Vampires' Blood/Christ's Blood*

Vampires are big these days. Next Saturday night is Halloween, and, if it's anything like the last few Halloweens, vampire costumes will be one of the two or three most popular. There is a series of teen romance novels about vampires called *Twilight*, which has also been made into a movie that is very popular with young people these days. For people of my generation, we recall Frank Langella as *Dracula*. Maybe some of you even remember *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, a made for TV movie from the 1970s.

Why the all fascination with vampires? What is it about them that interest us so? We all have a fascination with “the dark side.” Evil has a nearly irresistible draw for us. That's part of our sin-infested psyches. At one time the vampire was depicted as a beast that we projected all our prejudices and self-loathing on. But nowadays vampires are presented as brooding romantic heroes, misunderstood individuals unfairly ostracized by society. Of course, there is also an attraction to the power vampires are supposed to possess: great strength, mind reading, shape shifting, and even flying – characteristics we all would like to have. Their greatest attraction is probably their immortality. Vampires are the undead; they live forever, more or less.

However, the traditional myth says that there is a heavy price vampires pay for their privileges. They have to avoid sunlight; they can only come out at night. They can't eat and drink normal food. They can only drink blood, which they must have for survival -- and some people find that thrilling and others find it repulsive. And vampires have to avoid religious symbols such

as Holy Water, Communion Wafers, and, the ever-popular late, late show vampire bane, the Crucifix.

No credible Christian church confesses belief in vampires. Personally, I don't believe vampires are real, although some people do, and some people really believe themselves to be vampires. There is a rare but documented disease with symptoms, such as sensitivity to sunlight and receding gums that make the canine teeth look bigger, that mimics the characteristics we imagine vampires to have. It's ironic that during the late Middle Ages the Catholic Church, in an effort to wipe out superstitious beliefs, including the belief in vampires, actually did more to spread the myth and give it credence by investigating it.

A variation on the traditional vampire is what are known as "psychic vampires." These are supposed to be people who are emotionally or spiritually weak themselves, but who "feed" off the "life force" of others. I don't believe in psychic vampires literally, but I am sure we have all known people who really don't seem to have much going on in their hearts and minds, but who do attach themselves to others and seem to drain off their victims' energy and vitality. The personalities and pathologies of some people wear us down emotionally and spiritually.

So what does all this vampire talk have to do with Christ and his church, and the Bible lessons we read, and Reformation Sunday? While the vampire myth may seem attractive to us, and while we might think we want the powers they are said to have, in fact we probably wouldn't want to make the deal the vampires made if we could. Many people do make a similar deal

with the devil, trading their souls by abusing and taking advantage others for some type of gain, without actually biting anyone on the neck. When we misrepresent the truth, when we scheme to get things that are not rightfully ours, we have in effect sold our souls for some fleeting victory. Then we are on the “dark side.” The “dark side” calls to us always with its siren song, but it’s not really a great place to be. Jesus tells us that people love the dark more than light because their deeds are evil. Still, Jesus calls us into the splendor of his light, a far better place for us to be. True and lasting joy, freedom, and power are found there.

Vampires, both the literary ones and the people who act like psychic vampires, seem as if they are free and powerful, but they are not. Vampires are slaves to sin. They are dependent on others for their life force, whether it is the fictional blood of victims or the real emotional energy of others. That’s not be freeing; that dependency is being a slave. True freedom is found only in Christ, the Son of the Most High God. True freedom comes from clinging to the truth that Jesus is the Lord of our lives. In submitting to his gracious rule, we find genuine liberty. In Christ, we find freedom from sin, and death, and the devil.

How do we partake of that freedom in Christ, that Christian liberty? The surprising answer is, through blood -- Jesus’ blood. Jesus shed his blood on the cross to make atonement for us. The rich merits of the cross are first communicated to us in Holy Baptism. In Holy Baptism we are washed in Holy Water, plain water and the Word of God joined together, and that makes us a part of God’s kingdom. An old hymn refers to Baptism as being plunged beneath a fountain of blood drawn from Jesus’ veins, and it’s true.

In Holy Baptism we are washed clean of the stain of original sin and freed from the kingdom of the devil by the power of Jesus' blood.

Then in Holy Communion, we drink blood; specifically, we drink Jesus' sacramental blood and eat his sacramental body. The Bible, from the book of Genesis on, proclaims that the power of life is in the blood. That is why the myth of undead blood-sucking parasites arose, because people know that there is real life giving power in blood. The power in Jesus' blood forgives our sins and makes us at one with him. We can easily see then how Christian objects (Holy Water, the Communion wafer, and the Crucifix) came to be seen in folklore as weapons against vampires. Yet, they also really are powerful weapons for us as we strive to protect ourselves from the darts and temptations of the Evil One. They make us at one with Christ where we are safe. That's what atonement means: "at-one-ment."

To be at one with Jesus is to share in his life. Vampires aren't really living. The undead life would be no life at all. To hide all day in a coffin, and to have to fear any villager with a torch and pitchfork wielding a wooden stake, is not a good way to live. Neither are living far from Christ, and his church, and his Word, and his worship a good way to live. Jesus offers us something much better than that. He offers us eternal life with him in heaven. All that heaven is we cannot yet exactly say, but we know that whatever it is, it will put this old world to shame. We get just a tiny foretaste of heaven in our Holy Communion, as all that Jesus can give us is condensed into a bite of bread and a sip of wine. Communion transports us to that world beyond.

Martin Luther had a hope and a longing for that world to come that Jesus shows us. He also saw that he had work to do in the church in this world while he still had breath in his body. Don't we all? Luther worked hard to free the church, through the proclamation of the gospel, from those who knowing or unknowingly sucked the life out of it by making worship unintelligible, and by distorting the Good News of Christ. It's interesting that one of Luther's first reforms in worship was to restore the cup to the laity during Holy Communion, so that they could once again receive the Lord's blood. This renewed the people's enthusiasm for the sacrament, which brought vitality back to the church.

That's a big part of what the Reformation did, it restored vitality, and enthusiasm to the church. It took people away from the deadly dull "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin" philosophy of the medieval theologians. It put the emphasis right back where it should be: on mission and ministry flowing out of the unadulterated Word of God.

Martin Luther, a peasant born monk teaching at an undistinguished backwater university, having read God's Word, had the audacity to ask questions of the church and question the church's old answers. But the truth of Christ found Luther and set him free. Proclaiming that truth, despite powerful enemies stacked against him, Luther liberated others with that same God-given truth. That liberating work of the gospel continues on in the spirit of the Reformation even today, but, as in Luther's day, it's not so much in the white-washed halls of the old establishment, but on the fringes of Christendom where the people live, and work, and meet. That's where the call of Christ is lived out: in the real world.

What is Christ calling us to do? Using the images we've discussed today, we might say that we are called to reject the "dark side" and the supposed power it offers. True power and wisdom are found in Christ alone. Through the blood of the cross, Christ promises us life, real eternal life, not unending servitude to evil. That life comes to us through the means of grace: Baptism, Holy Communion, and the Word of God. Christ empowers us then to walk away from the people and structures that would suck out our life-blood and the joy of living in Christ's church. We will have our joy restored as we live out our freedom in Christ, being open to the new ventures Holy Spirit is inviting us to now, all the while remaining absolutely true and steadfast to God's Word.

And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.