

# Blood Brother

Salem Lutheran Church  
Glendale, CA  
March 20, 2008



Matthew 26:27-28

“And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”



In 1955 when we were each 8 years old, my best friend Gary Norton and I decided to become blood brothers. Gary had an older sister, but no brothers. And I was an only child. And each of us wanted a brother. So we hung out together a lot. We went to the same church and lived close to each other. We roamed the woods together, played baseball every chance we got and spent long hours on creek banks fishing or catching crawdads and salamanders. We spent the night at each other’s house as often as our parents would let us. We traded baseball cards back and forth. We fought and argued at times like real brothers but always found a way to make up. And sometimes when a neighbor wasn’t watching, we would sneak into his pasture and take turns riding his gentle red mare bareback.

So, we decided one day to become blood brothers. We were old enough to know about infections and lock jaw, so we took precautions. I went and got a box of wooden matches from the kitchen when Mom wasn’t looking. Then in broad daylight in my front yard as we sat opposite each other on the thick moss under a big sugar maple tree, each of us made sure his pocket knife blade was “sterilized”. Then, each made a shallow cut on his arm. And then, as the blood appeared, we joined the cuts together, imagining the tingle of each other’s blood in our veins. And, viola! We were blood brothers.

It was long before AIDS had ever come on the scene. And long before our innocence was stolen from us by the bloodshed of the 1960’s and all the years since. It was also 5 years before Gary and I would enter Confirmation and study about Holy Communion and The Last Supper and The Blood of The New Covenant and get ready for our First Communion and hear the Pastor say to each of us, “The Blood of Christ shed for you.”

Now, I do not recommend to young people today that (you) (they) do what Gary and I did. In fact, I recommend against it. Don’t do it! Even so, we adults know that we still have to

exchange blood at times, because we know it has to be done under certain circumstances, to save lives. That's what the Red Cross Bloodmobile is all about.

Yet, we know that the ritual of exchanging blood as Gary and I did has been going on for ages. The scholars have researched it on every continent in the world in every culture as far back as the first cave markings. Boys have done it. Girls. Men. Women. At all ages.

And as they have done it, some have made solemn promises to each other and then carried copies of those promises on their persons for the remainder of their lives. One blood covenant between two young Lebanese men of Arab descent reads, "We are brothers in a covenant made before God: who deceiveth the other, him God will deceive."<sup>1</sup>

I don't remember any promises Gary and I made to each other. We could have. I just don't remember. I may just ask him when I go to N.C. at the end of April. Maybe there is something I should have been doing all these years that I haven't!

Did you ever experience the ritual of exchanging blood with a blood brother or a blood sister? Were promises involved? If so, who made them? Have they been kept?

"In the romances of King Arthur there is a story about a maiden daughter of King Pellinore—Percival's sister—who accompanied her brother and Sir Galahad to a distant castle in search of the Holy Grail.

"When they drew near the place, a band of knights from the castle accosted them and told them the custom in that land. Every maiden who passed through it had to yield a dish full of her blood. Percival and Galahad would hear nothing of it and slew a bunch of the knights in defense of their fair maiden. It was not until they made their way to the castle that they learned the rest of the story.

"Inside the castle a noble lady lay sick unto death, and the only way she could be saved was to be anointed with the blood of a pure maiden who was also a king's daughter. Hearing this, Percival's sister agreed at once to give her blood, but she gave so much that it killed her. 'I die, brother,' she said, wilting in front of him, 'for the healing of this lady.'"<sup>2</sup>

We know that blood is the essence of life. Without it we die. With it we live.

You remember the story of Cain's killing Abel. Abel's blood cries out to God. You remember the first thing Noah does when he gets off the ark – he makes a blood offering in thanksgiving to God. You remember that Abraham sacrifices animals as a part of his covenant

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<sup>1</sup> Gospel Medicine by Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1995, "Blood Covenant," p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 60.

with God. And you remember Moses throwing blood on the altar and on the people when he gives them the book of the law. And you remember the covenant God made with Abraham and sealed with the requirement of circumcision – the shedding of blood in the name of the covenant.<sup>3</sup> And of course, who does not remember the one plague in Egypt when the Nile river becomes blood. And who can forget the blood of the lamb that had to be sprinkled on the lintel and over the door posts on the night of the Passover.

The Old Covenant or The Old Testament, as we call it, is replete with blood throughout. From the animal sacrifices to the test God imposes on Abraham when he tells him to sacrifice his son Isaac. And we can see the knife about to be pulled across Isaac's throat before the angel stops it.

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “We hear the story of Abraham and Isaac and we want to yell, ‘Stop! Take that boy back down the hill, old man! What in the world do you think you are doing?’ The only reason we repeat the story at all is because it turned out all right in the end—that is, it turned out the way we wanted it to, because we cannot fathom Abraham's willingness to go as far as he did with his son. But in his world, it was the covenant with God that mattered. If he broke that, his son's life would be worth nothing to him. By offering God his only son, he offered the one thing he had to give that was more precious to him than himself. Killing Isaac was not the point; sharing Isaac's life blood was, and while we thank God it did not come to that, what do we think we are doing when we come to the Lord's Supper?”<sup>4</sup>

How do we feel when we come to most sacred part of the liturgy and the Pastor says at one point, “Again, after supper, he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and drink of it, all of you. This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people, for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me.’” How do we feel hearing that? Are we shocked? Is our “pocket knife” out and ready? Jesus is inviting us to enter a blood covenant.

Then, moments later, the Cup arrives in front of each of us, and the words, “The Blood of Christ shed for you.” And we drink it. And the bloods are mingled. His Blood. Our blood. And the covenant is renewed.

Sometimes, though, as this occurs we find ourselves just going through the motions. Our minds and hearts are in other places and we come and nothing shocks us.

Sometimes when young children come to their First Communion with literal ears and hear “The Blood of Christ shed for you” they are utterly grossed out. If it were the real thing, we would all be grossed out, wouldn't we?

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<sup>3</sup> Summary by Barbara Brown Taylor, Op. Cit., p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, Op. Cit., p. 61.

And yet, it is the real thing. It is Jesus Our Lord's Blood present in, with and under the wine, to mingle with our own blood. And as we drink it, the New Covenant is renewed. Jesus becomes our Blood Brother once again.

As to promises, well guess what! We make none. He makes them all! And as we drink, we are only told to remember.

He promises, "I love you so much I became one of you. I came to show you the way to travel. I will forgive you when you stray. I will show you how to live, to love, to serve, to forgive, to suffer and to die. I am with you always, to guide you, to strengthen you, to correct you, to uphold you. There is no need to be afraid. Now or ever. There is nothing you or anyone can ever do or not do that will cause me not to love you, each one of you. I willingly die for you. All of you. Each of you."

And so, we come, just as we are. Young. Old. Wealthy. Poor. At peace. Uptight. Any condition you find yourself in. Just as we are we come. And we drink. And His Blood mingles with ours.

Now do you know what this precisely means? I will tell you. Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other! He is our Blood Brother. We are Blood brothers and sisters!

Dear Blood Brothers and Sisters, when we drink this Cup, we accept God's gift of Life, the New Covenant is renewed for us and we are reminded that we do not live for ourselves alone. God is inside of each of us, riding our blood streams.<sup>5</sup> So that as we love and serve others as He loves and serves us, His Life gives Life to others. And they too then have the same Blood Brother as we.

It's all kind of neat, once you stop to think about it. Stop to think about it.

In the Name of The Father, and of +The Son, and of The Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase, "riding our blood streams," is taken from Barbara Brown Taylor, Op. Cit.