

“The bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”¹
(Jn. 6:51)

Year B Proper 14
Deut. 8:1-10
Psalm 34:1-8
Eph. 4: (25-29) 30-5:2
John 6:37-51ff

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O lead my blindness by the hand
Lead me to my familiar Feast
Not here or now to understand,
Yet even here and now to taste,
How the eternal Word of heaven
On earth in broken bread is given.²

William Ewart Gladstone
Nineteenth Century

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every preacher has a sermon with a capital “S”--a theme which returns again and again, though in different ways, like facets in a prism. While the Sermon (capital S) might be a passionately favorite topic of the preacher, it is not always easy. So today, God has given it to me to preach on one of the most difficult passages of Scripture. You see, it’s easy to preach on a lesson that tells a story or sings a Psalm. But when we enter the scene right at the climax of Jesus’ “sermon” on the day after the feeding of the five thousand, and hear him saying “The bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my *flesh*”³ we suddenly wonder if the Gospel writer got it right--or even whether Jesus has taken leave of his senses! Today I hope to leave you with the assurance that John indeed got it right and that Jesus meant what he said in this passage and in the even harder verses which follows it.

For the bread that I shall give for the life
of the world is my flesh.

It starts small. I’ve been thinking about friendship--how it forms and what things sustain it. Suddenly I realized that, at one time or another, I have shared a meal with every close friend I have. Your vicar, Carol can attest to this. We first met briefly while she was working at Guide Dogs (where, incidentally, she probably knew “Christmas” as a puppy). When she came to seminary, near where I live, we became friends and often shared cup of coffee or hot chocolate at Brewed Awakening. Then lunch and conversation in the Refectory. Then I invited her to tea at my home. And, of course, we attended seminary Chapel almost daily together. Always, there was bread of one kind or another. We literally became companions--ones who share the bread.

Just after I met Carol, I began to teach at the School for Deacons. Because the diaconal call and ministry are bound up in proclaiming the Good News to, praying for and serving

¹ This sermon is adapted from one I preached in September, 1985.

² *A Eucharist Sourcebook*, p. 25

³ Italics mine.

the marginalized, not a class session weekend would go by without being at a Eucharist and hearing of and praying for the needs of the world: “For the poor, the sick, the hungry and those who suffer...for prisoners, captives and all who are in danger...”⁴ And about this same time, I began to help with Hot Meals for the Homeless at St. Mark’s in Berkeley. “Friend” became “Friends” in a larger way, and I began to understand what Jesus meant when he said:

The bread that I shall give for the life
of the world is my flesh.

Receiving Communion is more than just the “me and Jesus” experience most of us had in our childhood when we went to church. We don’t have to read far in the headlines to see a world so badly in need of the life for which Jesus died: the tragic fighting in the Middle East, starvation and AIDS in Africa and here, poverty, homelessness, crime, global warming and the Anglican Communion, so badly divided. And we don’t have to look far in this room to be aware of each other and know each others’ needs. Communion and Community come from the same root. When Jesus gives himself to us, we become his Body, and we are expected to give ourselves to others--friends and enemies, near and far--in his Name.

Now if only I could stop here! If only I could wind up this nice Social Gospel sermon to and sit down. But it goes on and gets harder. Jesus’ identification of himself with the bread must have shocked his hearers. After all, Jewish law forbade the eating of food not completely drained of blood and, though there were some abuses of the sacrificial system, cannibalism was unthinkable. Even so, Jesus’ hearers would have understood his words literally--and they would have heard in them deeper meanings that our English translations can impart. For to Jewish and early Christian ears, the words “flesh” and “blood” meant far more than the physical (and separate) parts of the body we know. “Flesh” meant one’s whole person: body, soul, mind and spirit. “Blood” meant the very essence of life itself.

But knowing this did not keep Jesus hearers from disputing among themselves saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” For centuries to come, the Church debated the question in an attempt to explain this bread-become-the Body of Christ. Actually, those Medieval theologians got a bad press, but perhaps it was Queen Elizabeth I who said it best when she came up with an Anglican “Middle Way” of explaining the mystery:

It was the Word that spake it.
He took the bread and brake it,
And what his word doth make it,
That I believe and take it.⁵

And the debate goes on today. Only now scholars don’t debate HOW the bread becomes the Body of Christ, but WHETHER it does. They spiritualize the passage and say that Jesus didn’t really mean those words. Jesus answered the dispute not by

⁴ Compiled from Prayers of the People, *Book of Common Prayer*.

⁵ Norman Fox, *Christ in the Daily Bread* < http://lords-supper.org/resources/fox_real_meal.html>
Quatrain attributed to Queen Elizabeth I.

explaining HOW his flesh and blood would “get into” the bread and cup, nor did he brush the whole thing aside as an empty symbol. Rather, he impressed upon them that if they wanted life at all--life with any meaning--life for the world--they would have to partake of the Lord of Life, himself. And he speaks to us too. He promised that whoever gathered in his Name to celebrate the mystery of his death and resurrection would find him--all of him-- present in bread and wine. To receive Communion (or, as the Gospel says, when we partake of Jesus’ flesh and blood) is literally to become one with Jesus and to have Jesus become one with us. And it is to become companions in the deepest sense--those who share the Bread that Jesus gives.

What difference should this make in our lives? Communion gives us strength for our individual journeys. It will help me entrust my beloved “Christmas” to Carol today and it will help her entrust me to receive a new dog tomorrow and train with it for the next three weeks and then to let us loose on the world beyond. And I’m sure each of you needs Jesus’ strength for your journey, too.

But it also gives us a different world-view. It helps us pray “for the life of the world” and enlarge our definition of “Friend”. It helps us see where help is needed and energizes us to (as St. Teresa puts it, “Be Christ’s eyes and hands and feet in the world.” It helps us grow as a community, both in our love for one another and in our desire to bring more people here. In receiving Communion, we ask to see everything through Jesus’ eyes.

In the end, though, the Eucharist is larger than our individual or even our corporate journeys. Eucharist means “thanksgiving” and is the way Jesus gave us of remembering in thanksgiving his life, death and resurrection--his supreme act of love for us.

So I invite you to come to this Table. Come prepared by reconciling yourself to God and your neighbors. Come longing to receive the whole Person of Jesus. Most of all, come in thanksgiving for his love. Then be willing to carry Jesus from this place into the world for which he gave his life and for which he rose again. Perhaps the great liturgist Balthazar Fischer said it best:

The table awaits us at which our baptismal life is fed over and over again. We have every reason to cry out in gratitude: Alleluia, alleluia!⁶

⁶ Balthasar Fischer, from *A Eucharist Sourcebook*, p. 39.