

Sermon August 16, 2009

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I think I've mentioned before that I am a rare breed of Episcopal priests. By that I mean that I am a lifetime Episcopalian, baptized in Christ Church, Springfield, Mo. as an infant. My memories are very mixed. I know I didn't attend many inquirers' classes before confirmation, but somehow it impressed me that after I was confirmed I could take the bread and wine of communion. I remember being a little taken aback however, when the "bread" turned out to be a thin little wafer, which, to the embarrassment of my mother, I called "fishfood."

There have been worse replies than that one. On one occasion of repeating Jesus' familiar words, "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you," a small girl suddenly said in a loud voice, "Oh, yuk!" The congregation looked horrified, as if someone had splattered blood all over the water—which, in effect, is just what the little girl had done with her exclamation.

I have sometimes referred to the life of Jesus as the longest running serial story in all history, for the influence and impact of his life still is alive in our midst. Some of that serial story we have shared in recent weeks, as now this is my fourth sermon on the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. The first sermon was under a tent before a picnic celebrating St. James' Day, and it was so appropriate that we began on the John's theme of Jesus as food from heaven. "I AM the bread of life" we hear repeated, and then now we hear and read "I AM the living bread that came down from heaven" and "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."

I don't think we can pull down the shades of our minds and ignore what John is picturing Jesus as saying—here or anywhere else.

At the same time, I have never actually met a single person who believes Jesus means he has become a loaf of bread, really, actually, substantially. We always have to keep in mind how often John portrayed Jesus with metaphors. Of course he is not literally a door, or a gate, or a vine. And even in the psalms when we read "The Lord is my shepherd" we don't mean that the Lord God of this mysterious universe is a keeper of sheep.

When I first took communion, when I was about ten or twelve, you can be sure that I wasn't burdened by any concerns about figures of speech and metaphors. What I did know that this service was somehow special, and warranted the extra time it took on Sunday morning, because it connected me some way with the people around me who mattered to me. I had to learn later how that experience was a link to the very first band

of followers who could testify later that Jesus' resurrection body, his real presence, was known and remembered as times when they broke bread together, at Jesus last supper with them before his death, and experiences as on the road to Emmaeus when Jesus' appeared and broke bread with them.

It was from experiences of breaking bread together that somehow bonded the risen Christ into their lives. It was from that experience that St. Paul would write perhaps the first Gospel, in 55 a.d. before Matthew, Mark and Luke, experiences that had to be written down, because they were so indelibly connected to the time that Jesus walked, wept, and prayed with them. By the time John wrote his Gospel this experience of breaking bread together was their common bond, inspiring John to take 71 verses to describe, not explain, how Jesus was forever being connected to them with the power of his spirit in their midst.

Now I think you may have noted by now that I haven't tried to explain or define HOW the communion you and your children receive at the altar are in fact the living bread that John speaks of.

If you were here last Sunday you remember that I told the story of those who asked the great dancer Pavlova to explain her dance. To which she responded "If I could explain it I wouldn't have to dance it.

Well, through the centuries the ancient Church tried to "explain" the living presence of Jesus in the sacrament, and arrived by 1454 with the theory of transubstantiation where the bread and wine always look and taste the same, not changed in appearance but through the prayers of the priest are changed in substance. Much like a dollar bill is still paper, looks like paper, tears like paper but you don't tear it because it isn't just paper it's money. Bread and wine have been changed from food and drink to the presence of a living body if the right prayers are said by the right Man with the power to say those prayers.

Our Church never accepted that explanation, nor did it ever attempt another explanation. I, for one, am thankful that we haven't. The mystery remain, and one can appreciate the power of the living presence without trying to explain it.

As I was preparing this final sermon of four on the bread of communion whose power for St. John was linked to the eternal presence of Christ, I suddenly remembered how this bread from the altar became a living presence for me. Fast backward to Korea in December of 1952. I had successfully moved heaven and earth (read that division headquarters) to get orders that would send me home for Christmas. I got as far south as Inchon in Korea, but the devil intervened to slow things down, and I wound up discouraged and frustrated serving as sergeant of the guard on Christmas Eve in Sasebo, Japan. There was a changing of the guard shortly before midnight and I got a pass to go into Sasebo hunting for a church service.

My US Army uniform notwithstanding, I found the local Nippon sei ko kai, the Holy Catholic Church of Japan, established by Anglican missionaries in 1859, just a few minutes into their midnight service. I could recognize the Anglican form of the service, if not the words, and I followed other worshippers to the altar to receive the bread and wine. Then as the priest placed the small wafer in my outstretched hand he looked at me and said clearly in English "The body of our Lord Jesus Christ... feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving."

As an administrative sergeant major working the system to get home for Christmas I had failed in that--- but when I heard those words from the priest and received that bread, I knew that I had received the Living Bread and that I was home all right, but in a new and special way. In the bread and wine that night I knew the presence of the One who was born a stable so that we might know his life linked with mine for all eternity, giving everything he had, his love and his life, so that others, even I, might live.

AMEN!