

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

2 Samuel 18: 5 – 9, 15, 31 – 33
Ephesians 4: 25 – 5: 2

Ps. 130
John 6: 35, 41 – 51

Focus: In Christ, God gives us bread for the journey.

Function: Listeners will understand that communion gives us strength to reach the glory.

Another Sunday and another Gospel reading and sermon about bread, as we continue in the 6th Chapter of John.

The Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton tells the story of when, as a young pastor, he was teaching a Lutheran Catechism Class on a Sunday afternoon. One of the three teenagers came to class, carrying his little, four-year old sister on his hip because their mother has had to run to the hospital to see Grandma. Chilton settled little Annie into the corner with a coloring book and crayons where she quietly colored, while the class went on to learn about the Eucharist. Chilton asked questions from the Lutheran catechism and the teens responded:

Q: What two things make a Sacrament?

A: An earthly element and a divine command

Q: What is the earthly element in communion?

A: Bread and wine

Q: What are the bread and wine?

A: The Body and Blood of Jesus

Q: So, when we eat the bread, what are we eating?

A: The Body of Christ

Q: And when we drink the wine, what are we drinking?

A: The Blood of Christ

At which point, there was a retching sound in the corner as little Annie – who had been listening to every word – promptly threw up.

Like the folks around Jesus, we're okay when Jesus is talking about bread as bread. As in asking the disciples what they plan to feed the crowd of 5,000 that gathers to hear Jesus speak. We're good with bread when Jesus is warning the disciples, "Beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!" We're good with bread when Jesus tells the parable of the woman mixing yeast "into three measures of flour until it was all leavened." But, like Annie, we're not so good when Jesus begins to compare a freshly baked, brown, puffy loaf of bread with the flesh of his body. Or wine with the blood flowing through his veins. Not if we get beyond our liturgical niceties and really think about it. It's gross. It's crude and visceral and primal and cannibalistic and, well, just plain gross.

Unfortunately, we are so accustomed to hearing this language in our worship services and in Scripture that, *unless* we stop to really think about the words, we are no longer truly fazed by it. Not like little Annie or Jesus' original listeners who are hearing it for the first time. Remember that, for the Jews, meat is to be drained of blood, the life element, before it is prepared and consumed. And Jesus, with his intentional choice of words, doesn't help. In Greek, the word Jesus uses is σαρχ, which means 'flesh,' as opposed to the use elsewhere of σωμα, which means - more benignly - 'body.' Then there is the word translated for us as "eat," but which really means something more animalistic, like "gnaw" or "chew." All in all, Jesus paints a picture not unlike a lion consuming a gazelle on the tv program, *Nature*. Which is why Jesus' first listeners are so disgusted.

This sixth chapter of John has been described as ‘the continental divide’ in the Gospel [Philip A. Apol, *Synthesis* 8.13.00] because, from here on out, the people are either for Jesus, or against him because they are offended. Some are offended by Jesus’ choice of language and its implications. Some are offended that he is claiming to come from heaven when they know darn good and well that the boy was raised in his father’s carpenter shop in Nazareth.

Now, as we mentioned last week, John is most likely writing this Gospel about 60 or 70 years after Jesus dies and is resurrected. John has sort of the opposite problem. For John’s audience in the early church and beyond, it’s not so much a matter of convincing folks that Jesus was from *heaven*, but rather that Jesus was actually a flesh and blood human being. The people to whom John is writing are offended by the possibility that Jesus might really have been human. Greek philosophy, which predominates in the eastern Mediterranean at this time, has the notion that the physical or material is bad and the spiritual is good. That leads to thinking that religion should be about only the spiritual and escaping the physical. So, many of John’s intended audience are folks who would like to think that Jesus only *appeared* to be human, but was really 100% spirit. And that is why John works so hard to convince people that Jesus was a real, flesh-and-blood human being, as well as from heaven.

John wants his readers and listeners, including us, all these years later, to know that Jesus didn’t just appear to be human, Jesus really did eat and sleep and go to the bathroom and all those other things that we do. Why is that so important? Because it matters whether Jesus really suffered and died on the cross, and descended to the dead, before he was resurrected. If it was just a David Copperfield magic trick, an illusion, if Jesus only *appeared* to be human and only *appeared* to suffer and die and it wasn’t real, then it would make no difference to us and to the world. It would just be a nice story, but it wouldn’t change anything about us or the world or our relationship with God. It would not have anything to say to us about the depth of God’s love for us. It would not provide an affirmation that God has created the material world as good and deigned to come and dwell in it.

In the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960’s, sacramental Christians, us included, were provided a fundamental understanding of the Eucharist. “In the terrestrial liturgy, we participate, as a foretaste, in the heavenly.” In other words, there is more beyond what we can see and taste and experience here, but it is a glimpse, a taste. Centuries earlier, Thomas Aquinas had written, “This sacrament does not introduce us immediately into glory, but gives us the strength to reach the glory...” and so Vatican II refers to the Eucharist as a ‘pledge of future glory.’ What a lovely image that, like the daily portion of manna in the wilderness for the Israelites, in the Eucharist we are given that which sustains us until we are enveloped in the fulness of God’s mercies and love. To borrow an expression regarding the Hebrew Sabbath from the eminent Hebrew scholar, Abraham Heschel, the Eucharist is a “tasting of eternity in time.”

In our Episcopal tradition, we celebrate the Eucharist as the primary service every Sunday. Week in and week out, we use the language of Christ’s Body and Blood, as we take and bless and break and give the bread and the wine. We believe in the real presence of Christ in these earthly elements. We don’t know how. We’re okay with the mystery. But somehow, Christ is here. We believe in the good news, the Gospel, that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate, God living and breathing among us, but also, a Gospel where Jesus is born of Mary, and therefore fully human as well. A Gospel where Jesus chooses to suffer and die on the cross to show us just how great God’s love is – that there is nothing we can do to separate ourselves from the love of God. A Gospel where Jesus shows us that all things – us included – can be redeemed. A Gospel that promises a new and recreated life with God – what ‘eternal’ life

really means. A Gospel that says God has a future in store for each of us and all of us, and that that future is already in motion. So today, and each time, as we gnaw and chew on the bread that is the Body of Christ and drink the wine that is the Blood of Christ, may we remember that we are taking a bite out of the future that God promises us and drinking deeply of our hope in Jesus. May we allow the Eucharist – the bread and the wine, as simple as they are – to open us up to the future of God while anchoring us firmly in our own present reality. And may the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ keep us in everlasting life. +