

Year A, 21st Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25)
October 25, 2020
The Rev. Dr. Brent Was

“Lord, you have been our refuge * from one generation to another.”

Usually, I am an exegetical preacher, meaning that I preach the Lectionary. I pray and study the texts indicated for each Sunday. This helps us follow the Holy Ghost (and the *Zeitgeist*) to what is important right now, it keeps the Gospel alive. As the theologian Karl Barth said, we should preach with the Gospel in one hand and the iPhone in the other. That is generally what is proper. On occasion, though, like today, we have other things to attend to.

We haven't talked a lot about what are we doing here. Not here as in “here on Earth,” but very specifically right here, in this time of COVID, this time of virtual church. What are we doing here? What does it mean? Does it matter? Today is our 32nd Sunday online, and this will not be changing any time soon. So let's think about what we are doing.

This all pushes a lot of buttons for me. I have theologically rigorous reasons that recorded music at church is an abomination. I would never, NEVER allow a video projector in the Nave for our principal service. (I can barely tolerate microphones). If it is not in the rubrics of the Prayer Book, it has no place on Sunday, this is a big part of what makes us Episcopalian: Common Prayer. I was formed liturgically by monks. Incense and bells, sung Mass, proper elevation of the bread and wine, that is what I learned. Those things aren't essential, though I do maintain that they help keep our eyes on the God in Christ prize, but in general I am pretty conservative in my liturgical practice and theology. I use the word *Mass*, for eucharist, which, by the way, is listed in the BCP along with Eucharist, Holy Communion and others as appropriate names for eucharistic worship. In any case, this, what we are doing, this is not what I was taught, none of us were. Who'd a thunk it could ever be this way? Lord have mercy.

The center of our Common Prayer at St. Francis now is spiritual communion. I hear questions about using our own bread and wine and holding it up to the camera to be consecrated. Presbyterians and Lutherans are doing that, and I have good internet now, so maybe that would work? Our Bishop, with guidance from Bishop Curry, have said no to remote communion. Lots of good reasons there. But then why can't we consecrate a whole bunch and send it home to everyone? They even have these little communion go-cups like a coffee creamer with a wafer taped to the top. “A versatile new resource for celebrating communion.” We could do that. We do have

drive-thru communion. Actually today we are doing that, but that is more of a pastoral activity. Sure it is sacramental, but that is not why we do that. Why spiritual communion as primary?

Let's talk about sacraments in general first. What is a sacrament? _____ It is an "outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual grace." That is straight from St. Augustine and it is in the Prayer Book; it doesn't get any more bonified than that. A Sacrament is something we do physically that reflects something that God does spiritually, something eternal and actual happening in our souls, in and amongst us, faith Christians. What actually happens? "Great is the mystery of faith" is the appropriate response. That may seem a vague and unconvincing answer, but actually is it not. You know, or some part of you knows what happens when you receive communion. The same goes for when you were baptized, married, ordained, absolved of your sins in the Rite of Reconciliation (Confession)... you know, even if you couldn't possibly explain it.

So is it something happening to the water that changes a little dunk or a sprinkle into an eternal and actual encounter with God? Or Eucharist, is it the right words said, the correct hand gestures, the proper bowing and scraping that make it holy? No. That would be magic; harnessing supernatural powers to change the world. I know it's confusing. The very words *hocus focus* likely came from the Latin Words of Institution, *Hoc est enim corpus meum*, "This is my body..." which are the operative words of the Mass. But this isn't magic. We don't do magic at church; we do miracles.

It is not the water, though the water completes Baptism; it is not the words of absolution in Confession, though they articulate what is happening; it is not the bread and wine cum Body and Blood that you take into your own body that makes the Eucharist, it is the spiritual grace experienced in the midst of the rite that consistently, definitively and forever links us to God in Christ with the Holy Spirit. A miracle! Have you felt that? Had that feeling of wholeness, completeness, total satisfaction in the moments surrounding eucharist? St. Ignatius calls that feeling consolation. Have you felt consolation?

Miracles happen with mysterious regularity in the midst of the Body of Christ. It is all of us together that allow it to happen. Through ordination, with its apostolic succession and the consent of the people, priests have our part to play as administrators of the rites within which these miracles happen, but it is by grace that God makes whatever happens, happen, and this particular species of grace, Sacraments, happen only within the context of the gathered Body of Christ. I could consecrate a bakery's worth of bread, but if it were outside of the realm of Church, of the gathered people of God, it would just be bread.

But we're on Zoom, we are not gathered, right? Well, I don't know about that. It is not the same, obviously. Our outward and physical selves are very separate. Ellen is in New Mexico. Terry and Jim are in South Carolina. I'm in Bill Gould's carriage house in Blue Hill. And yet... God is here. Can you feel that? Not all the time, (no one feels God all the time when we are at the church), but do you feel it? Do you feel God's presence here? Do you feel grace happening? Maybe it is in the act of spiritual communion. Maybe not. Maybe it is in the hymn, or the prayers, or seeing another human being in real time doing something, anything, or just getting a glimmer of how life used to be, how it will be again some day. The absence is real, we all feel the loss of this time, but that is not the end of the story.

The Reverend Dr. Ruth Meyers is our most prominent liturgical theologian right now. She writes of the Eucharist in physical distancing times, "We glimpse Christ's presence, getting a taste of the heavenly banquet, yet on this side of the grave we never experience the fullness of that presence. Real absence draws us forward to the time when we shall see God face to face. Real absence makes room for the mystery of God whose presence we can neither compel or control."

In this brave new virtual world, in this nation whose politics are defined by lies, misinformation and "alternative facts" we hunger, we thirst for what is real. The spiritual benefits of absence are real, but so many things are absent from our lives right now that I don't want to make a practice out of it. Some saying we are in a season of fasting, COVID times, but that's the wrong way to look at it. Fasting is a fine spiritual practice, but like the practice of poverty, when it is involuntary, it is not a practice, it is misfortune. In this virtual time, I know that I need Real, Real with a big R, particularly when it comes to church. We all need that, especially now, not some stylized facsimile but a Real encounter with Ultimate Reality, you know, God. And you know what, I think we do that.

In a world in which polemic and opinion supplant facts, where so many people believe things that are utterly and empirically untrue, when our leaders blatantly lie and intentionally distort the truth, and all of it is filtered through systems controlled by a scant few corporate behemoths who don't have our interests in mind (unless you are in investor), it seems that maybe we need to go beyond this world in order to find a firm foundation. Spiritual knowledge is a legitimate source of truth. Your faith is indisputable. What you know of Jesus Christ, much of it learned around the Altar of His church, is true. Holy Eucharist has been a place of common, shared experience for billions of people everywhere on Earth for over two millennia. In this fractious moment, we need to step back, encounter God, and reorient ourselves based on this eternal waypoint that arises

whenever the people of God gather in God's name. The church. The Mass. What we are doing right now. Can I get an Amen?

What we need, and I mean that, what we need, is God. We need God's presence, God's Real presence, and we need it now. And we do that. It is happening right now. God is truly present, as Professor Meyers writes, "...not only in the bread and wine that are blessed and shared but also in the Word proclaimed and broken open in the homily, in the community gathered as the body of Christ, in song and prayer." So we gather on Zoom, even though "gather" is in air quotes. We sing along to beautiful hymns, so lovingly presented by Lorna and Carlton, Heather and the Caldwelles, but we are muted. We celebrate the Lord's Supper every week, though no one tastes that bread and wine, including me... it is lovingly and respectfully returned to the Earth from whence it came.

The important part, though, is not eating the bread and wine. Like the water is not the important part in Baptism. What is important is the presence of God, the real presence of God in Christ with the Holy Spirit for us, with us, to us, in us. Of course we prefer the outward signs to be more tangible, actually Bread and Wine is better, but you know, throughout the middle ages, virtually no one received at communion. Everyone was there, everyone participated in the sacrament, but throughout the Medieval period, what was important was participating in it as a member of the gathered Body of Christ. That is the Sacrament. That it happened is the miracle, not whether you tasted it or not. This is 1500 year old theology, we are not making this up to make us feel better about missing church. Echoes of those traditions persisted before COVID. When I elevate the bread and wine, that was so everyone could see, even the folks in the way, way back! The *sanctus* bells rung at the Institution were so that everyone could hear when the miracle occurred, either in really cheap seats or for those toiling nearby. That was that was almost everyone's experience of the sacrament for a thousand years. What we are doing here, these gatherings, the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist, it is real, it counts, and it matters. And it does not because of me, or the tradition we follow, or the words we use, it is real, it matters, it is made manifest in the love you show for one another and for God. In that, God is present. I am so glad you are here.

Let me finish up with some thoughts on spiritual communion from three of our great spiritual masters. The great Carmelite divine St. Teresa of Avilia wrote in *The Way of Perfection*, "you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you." St. Thomas Aquinas described spiritual communion as "an ardent desire to receive Jesus in the Holy Sacrament and a loving embrace as though we had already

received Him.” And in that same realm, the realm of desire for God, this is a prayer from Thomas Merton, that reveals the holy truth that our desire to please God, in fact, pleases God. Merton prays,

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. AMEN

But really, don't take any of our word for it. Pay attention to the movement of your heart as we gather at your kitchen table, your living room couch, the wide screen TV that this afternoon will host NFL games... Trust what your heart tells you. It does not lie. God is with you. AMEN