

Year B, 12th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15)
August 15, 2021
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“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.”

That is quite a claim about the Holy Eucharist. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Always pay attention when Jesus uses the word *abide*. “...whoever eats me will live because of me.” And the most direct, the hardest to spiritualize out of reality is the final sentence in our Gospel today: “But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

When it comes to the Holy Eucharist, as a friend of mine out in the other Portland likes to say, “What in God’s name are we doing for Christ’s sake?” He was a New Zealander, so maybe his brand of humor was a bit courser than we are accustomed to, but that is pretty funny; and part of what makes it funny is that it is a very good question. “What in God’s name *are* we doing for Christ’s sake in this case, in the Holy Eucharist?”

Because we are doing all of this in God’s name. I start my sermons “In the name of God: Ground, Word, Life.” I don’t know why I use that formula for the Trinity. Ground of Being is theologian Karl Rahner’s contribution to Christendom as a way to understand the nature of God. Jesus Christ is the Word. And the Holy Spirit, the wellspring of creation, the spirit of life is life, the power of life in which we live and move and have our being. That is a lot to claim to speak for. But we do. (We claim it and we speak for it, with God’s help, mind you, but the mystery of the Christ in the Church makes this possible).

And that is the first and most important footnote to anything spoken, written or think about the sacraments: great is the Mystery of Faith! Mystery of mysteries, all is mystery! And that is not just a punt on addressing the heart of the matter, the Mystery of God in Christ with the Holy Spirit *is* the heart of the matter, and all that we are doing here is fumbling along in the along the path laid by our ancestors trying as finite, mortal creatures to commune with the infinite. It is us, with our fleeting, perishing natures, finding true right relationship with the eternal, to abide in the everlasting

“Great is the Mystery of Faith!” That is the great Anglican existential statement. It is the final answer to all things. And it often goes with what I like to call the Anglican smug shrug. “How are we to know? Great is the mystery of faith!” There is a humility of sorts in that statement, and it is as right and good and even joyful as any theological claim. Great is the mystery of faith. But it still begs the question, when we gather around this table, “What in God’s name *are* we doing for Christ’s sake?”

Now one quick note... not everyone in this room is Episcopalian. (Remember, Anglican is a form of Christianity like Roman Catholicism, Methodism, or Orthodoxy. It arose in the English church

which was founded through St. Augustine's 6th Century mission to England. That's Anglicanism. Episcopal refers to the organization. You could think of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA [DBA the Episcopal Church] as the US franchisee of the Anglican Communion). Actually few of us here were born into the Episcopal church. Nationwide, fewer than 20% of people are buried in the church they are baptized in. In addition, many of you all who are here only in the summers, you go back to your Methodist or Presbyterian or Baptist community when you are at your off-season home. So I know that not everyone is steeped in Anglican sacramental theology, or cares to be. And that is totally fine. But I was reminded at a deacon's ordination on Monday that I vowed to uphold the doctrines and teachings of *this* church. So, bear with me. And anyway, understanding how others understand this rite can help deepen our own tradition's take on it. (It is all a great mystery).

First, remember St. Augustine (of Hippo, not Canterbury's) famous dictum: A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. That is what the Holy Eucharist is. The blessing, breaking, giving and receiving of bread and wine is the visible enactment of what Jesus was saying there in St. John's gospel. We enact eating Christ's body and drinking Christ's blood in eating bread and wine together. That is outward. Inwardly, spiritually, what we are doing is having an eternal and actual encounter with Jesus Christ. That is the baseline of what the Eucharist is about. No matter how you formulate *what* is happening, this is the why behind it across Christian forms.

So what is actually happening? Most importantly, don't believe anyone says they know what is happening in any sacrament. "Great is the mystery of faith" not only lets the theologian off the hook, it also lets the rest of us call a spade a spade and get on with communion with God. That said, there is an historical curiosity that defines the Anglican understanding of Eucharist.

So let's go back to the mid 16th century. The reformation had been raging on the continent since Luther nailed his 95 Thesis to the door of the church in Wittenburg in 1517. England was a bit behind the continent, but then everything got turned upside down when Henry VIII and the rest of England were excommunicated by Pope Clement the VII in 1531. He was the first Protestant king. England went Catholic again under his Granddaughter Mary "Bloody Mary" Tudor, but then his other Granddaughter, Elizabeth I ascended to the throne. Mary was known as Bloody because in England, as on the Continent, conflicts over wealth and power took on religious overtones and the great and powerful got the lowly and oppressed to fight it out for their (the great's) benefits. (Some things change, some things never do).

The point is that as Elizabeth ascended, Great Britan could have slipped further along the path of religiously fueled civil war. Wise Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, was opposed to religious extremism on any side. She and her Archbishop Matthew Parker, rebuilt the church along the *via media*, the middle

path between Protestantism and Catholicism. That is Anglicanism. Much of our form is very traditional, meaning very much in line with our Catholic heritage. And our beliefs are very Protestant, like the importance of scripture, like scripture in the local language in the hands of local people. Elizabeth passed a law that an English Bible had to be available for all people in every church.

One of the most outward and visible manifestations of what became known as the Elizabethan Settlement brings us back to the topic at hand, the Holy Eucharist.

In Catholic sacramental theology, what is the term for what happens to the bread and wine when it is consecrated? ____ Transubstantiation. No, they are not saying that the bread turns into meat, what it means is that the substance, the true meaning of the bread is transformed into the substance of Christ, the true meaning of Christ. Do you remember back to freshman philosophy, Platonic forms? There is *music standness*. This is a manifestation of the idea, the eternal form, the substance of a music stand. That is what Transubstantiation means.

So we have language to that effect in our Eucharistic prayer. “Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son...” (Rite I: “Sanctify these gifts... that they may be unto us the Body and Blood of thy dearly-beloved son Jesus Christ.”) We call it consubstantiation. “...to be for your people...” (Rite I: “...that they may be unto us...”) it is not claiming an ontological change in the elements, but for us, the participants, there is the real spiritual presence of Jesus Christ in the elements. Something happens. What? “Great is the mystery of faith! We just no something happens.”

That is a bit too hocus pocus-y for some of us. (Remember the term “hocus-pocus” for magic comes from the words of institution in the Latin Mass, *Hoc est corpus meum*, “This is my body.” But it is more than some of us experience or believe, particularly those of us who hold more dearly to the Protestant side of our family. So, in all of Elizabeth’s wisdom, she inserted a second and distinct theology of the eucharist into our prayer. Right before we remember the death, resurrection and ascension, we make the statement, “We celebrate the memorial of our redemption...” (Rite I: “{He} did institute, and in His Holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death and sacrifice until his coming again.” Or futher on: “...the memorial thy Son has commandest us to make...”).

We get from Calvin, Luther, Zwingli and the other protestant divines the notion that we celebrate Eucharist because Jesus told us to. And we do it not to encounter the actual Body and Blood of Jesus (con- or transubstantiated), but to remember and commemorate something Jesus did 2000 years ago. Now there is no great mystery in instituting and continuing a ritual in memory of some event. We do that all the time. The mystery in the Protestant formulation of the Eucharist is the power of Christ

that this communion can unleash, the power of love, of community, of the whole *ecclesia* gathered and focused on the Word. As C.S. Lewis put it in his Narnian discussion of reality and religion, there is deep magic in memory, in ritual itself. It can change all who gather around it, be it around the literary stone table of Aslan, the Cross of Jesus Christ, or around this table that we keep in His Holy name.

So when we gather around this table together as we will in a few minutes, along with who knows how many hundreds of thousands that are doing it at the 10 hour in the Eastern Time Zone, the hundreds of millions that will take it across the globe on this sabbath, be it in person or spiritually over the airwaves, there are a lot of things going on, or that might be going on, a lot of ways to understand what is happening in our sacramental rites. But we are all doing it in God's name.

And, we are all doing it for Christ's sake. Maybe we are keeping the memory of Jesus alive; the memory of His sacrifice, of our redemption, of His command, or the totality of His life and ministry, we do that for His sake as much as our own (or we should). Or, if we understand and/or experience the Holy Eucharist as an actual encounter with the eternal, living God, consuming the bread and wine that contain the real spiritual presence of our Lord and Savior, we do that for His sake also. That encounter must bring Him some great joy and consolation, no? That we gather and lean into Him, open ourselves to receive Him, consume Him, or as Augustine (again of Hippo, not Canterbury) wrote of the Eucharist: "Behold what you are. Become what you receive." Whether by memory or presence, we become Christ, Christ becomes part of us when we partake in this holy feast. Or, as we more eloquently say at 8:00, "Grant, we beseech thee, that all who partake of this Holy Communion may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of they Son Jesus Christ, and be filled with they grace and heavenly benediction; and also that we and all thy whole Church may be made one body with him, that he may dwell in us and we in him; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord." And that is what we are doing in God's name for Christ's sake. And from that, everything else we do radiates out into the world. Let's get to that table together. AMEN.