

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid

A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B | John 6:51-58

St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA

August 19th 2018

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

In just a little while, together we will share in a sacred moment of thanksgiving when we partake in Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. A lot is happening in that moment, that time in which we pray together to God the Father in grateful remembrance of the saving acts of God the Son while knowing his presence to come among us by the power of God the Holy Spirit. Among many ways of knowing it, the Eucharist is a mystery. And mysteries are difficult if not impossible to know fully.

The Church has spent two thousand years faithfully trying to better understand these moments of mystery, and it has come to believe many different things about what exactly happens to the bread and wine and to ourselves as we receive them. For those of us who may come from a Roman Catholic background, you may know of *transubstantiation*, the belief in which the substances of bread and wine become physically the body and blood of Christ. There may be others of us who come from certain Protestant or nondenominational backgrounds who have come to know the bread and wine (or grape juice) as symbols of the Last Supper, and because Jesus said "do this in remembrance of me," it is exactly that: a humble memorial in remembrance of Jesus with bread and wine, nothing else.

Of course, for Episcopalians, the answer is somewhere in the middle. There may be some Anglo-Catholics who lean towards the idea of transubstantiation, though at throughout the history of the Episcopal Church, we've been quite clear that we do not hold that belief. And yet, in other parts of the Episcopal Church, the exact opposite could be believed, that when Jesus said "This is my body," he meant so figuratively. As Anglicans, we often thrive on the idea of the *via media*, the middle way, that the truth of God is within the realm of many possibilities. However, what I think we can say for certain is that though we may differ on exactly what we think might be happening during the Eucharist, we come here to this table because Jesus has given his body and blood for the life of the world, and we find him here truly present in the sanctified bread and wine, abiding with us as we abide in him.

To want to more about what happens to the actual bread and wine might very well come from a place of faith, but as many in scripture have learned in tremendously important moments, God can sometimes be revealed more fully in mystery and symbol than in clarity. For example, Moses meets God in a burning bush, the Israelites knew God through the pillar of cloud in the wilderness, and Jesus regularly taught the truth of God in metaphor and parables, without explaining them most of the time. If you find Jesus' words without clarity, that means you're probably hearing them the right way. So in our Gospel lesson this morning, when the Jews ask him "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" it may not come as a surprise that he doesn't actually answer the question. He leaves the tension of this unresolved query. Like the humidity of August in Pennsylvania, the tension probably just sat there, ever present, and not going away. Maybe Jesus was the only one comfortable with that. But perhaps that's the point, that the inner workings of the mysteries of God are probably better left outside our purview -- as we are reminded many times during Morning Prayer, from Isaiah: "for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the Lord." And as happens many times in Jesus' interactions, he doesn't tell those in the synagogue a tidy answer that they wanted to hear but rather a difficult truth that which they needed to hear.

And what they heard was life! In all, there are nine mentions of "living," "live," or "life" in this morning's Gospel. If he wasn't clear about the flesh and blood, he was pretty clear that it all relates to life. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." I'm actually quite thankful that Jesus' words didn't come with a prerequisite of a certain amount of knowledge or qualification in order to participate. Because when we receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist, it is not because we are good enough for them or because we have done enough to deserve them. Instead, Christ offers us

his body and blood for the exact opposite reasons, that he is good enough to give them and because we are in need of receiving them.

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When it comes to what we believe about life, I do believe that people yearn for truth and for something real in this life. I also believe that all people are drawn to the presence of God even if we don't always know it. That's the power of mystery, too -- like the Israelites and the pillar of cloud, they may not have understood entirely how it happened, but they knew the presence of God was there, drawing them, guiding them, loving them. I invite and encourage you today to think and pray on *this* holy mystery of the Eucharist, that the living Father sent the living Son to be living bread so that God's people will live. For all that we've heard these many weeks about Christ and bread, remember that it isn't just a mind exercise or a series of readings we're supposed to read or questions we're supposed to answer. Remember that God knows that we yearn for him and has given us the bread of life to sustain us now and always. There are many weeks when I take the Eucharist that I have to really take my time to try to remember these things, that it's amazing that God would send his Son to this world to live as one of us, to reveal the love of God perfectly among us, to die on a cross for our salvation, and give his body and blood that we might live through him. In one way or another, that is the body and blood we receive this day and every time we gather together.

So whether we know very well what we believe or whether it all seems too much to comprehend, know that you are welcome here to look for an encounter with Christ again and again in this holy mystery, that we may be filled with his life and the promise of life to come. May Christ the bread of life abide in you this day and always.

Amen.