

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost
Proverbs 9:1-6, Psalm 34:9-14
Psalm 34:9-14 Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58

The Living Bread of Transformation

“The religious leaders then disputed among themselves, saying “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” What is he talking about?” He had already confused them with the talk about coming from heaven, and being the living bread that came down from above. Now he’s saying that people who actually eat his flesh and drink his blood will have life within them, and if they don’t eat, they don’t have life within them. What is all this talk about eating flesh and drinking blood? This would have been anathema to devout Jews. I know I still wince when I hear these words, and find them rather barbaric, smacking of cannibalism. Later on in this chapter, we can read that even his disciples recoiled at this, and found it a hard saying. Jesus even asked them if they, too, would turn back from following him, and Peter answered, “who else would we go to, you have the words of eternal life.” What is the gospel writer trying to say here? What might this passage mean?

Well, to review, we can look at the history of this Gospel and the community it was addressed to. As we discussed last week, this Gospel was the last one to be set down in written form. Its content differs substantially from the other three, except in the accounts of Jesus' suffering and death. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is no account of the institution of the Lord's Supper on the last night of Jesus' life; instead comments about the sacred meal, and the body and blood shared, are found in the beginning of this Gospel. As this was the latest recorded Gospel, it is reasonable to believe that this community had more time to develop a theology around the work and person of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection, and had been developing and living into the practice of the sacraments of baptism and the Holy Communion. So reflection on the meaning of the sacred meal, and ritual surrounding it, had most likely been practiced and experienced in this community for some time. So it is believed that the references to eating the flesh and drinking the blood were a reflection of this early Christian community's experience of being united to Christ in communion, of finding the life of the risen Christ in feeding on the body and blood in the sacred meal. According to Raymond Brown

in his wonderful commentary, “The Gospels and Epistles of John”, “here John gives what seems to be a variant of the words of the institution of the Eucharist: “The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” (This is my body given for you). If for Paul the Eucharist proclaims the death of the Lord until he comes, in John the emphasis is that the Word has become flesh and given up his flesh and blood as the food of life.” In this meal, the bread and the wine, is the sustenance and life of the community.

What are we doing when we bless, break and share the bread and drink the wine? What does it all mean? Learned theologians, bishops, priests and scholars have debated it for centuries. In the years following the Reformation, wars were fought and blood was shed over the meaning of this sacrament. There are many variations on the theology and doctrine of the Eucharist. In the Roman Catholic tradition, we have the concept of transubstantiation, which means that when the bread and wine are consecrated, they become the physical body of Christ, with the “accidents” of bread and wine, their color, taste, and texture, remaining. For Lutherans, the body of Christ is joined to the bread and wine. In some

Protestant denominations, it is thought that the bread and wine are spiritual vehicles for filling believers with the presence of Christ, and in others, it is a memorial, remembering what Jesus did for us, and then renewing our commitment to follow him. The catechism of the Episcopal church states: “The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.” And it continues “The inward and spiritual grace in the Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ, given to his people, and received by faith.” Of course, in our limited human understanding, we are trying to wrap our minds around a great mystery. Of this mystery, Queen Elizabeth the First famously said: “Twas God the Word that spake it, he took the bread and brake it, and what that Word did make it, that I believe and take it.” That seems as good an explanation as any that I have heard!

I’d like us now to return to the Collect of the Day we read at the beginning of the liturgy. We prayed: ”Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and

to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.” What might it mean to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work? Well, his redeeming work begins with the Incarnation, of God in Christ taking on our human flesh and sharing our life, and loving us and drawing us back to God. It continues with his willingness to seek the lost, proclaim liberty to the captives, and healing from all manner of sin and sickness, even though it cost him his life. Jesus’ offering of his life to break the power of sin, of death, of judgment, and reveal the unconditional love of God that has been there from the beginning, redeems us and reconciles us to God. And this work, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and through the fellowship and community of others in the Body of the Christ, continues to build us up in faith and love as we grow as disciples.

One way we receive thankfully the fruits of this redeeming work, is through the Holy Eucharist. Week after week, season after season, in times of illness and health, of prosperity and hardship, of joy and sorrow, it is our spiritual food. The bread that we break here at this altar, and the wine we share are living and powerful signs of Jesus’ death for our

salvation, and the love he poured out on the Cross, for us and for the whole world, for those who came before us, and for those who will come after, forever. When we receive Communion, we are indeed being nourished, healed, and restored by the very life of Christ, who loves us, and is continually giving himself to us.

As we continue to reflect on the mystery of the Eucharist, another way we might look at it is as a mystery of transformed time. The Real Presence of Christ, then, is not just localized in the consecrated bread and wine, but in this time outside of time, as our stories are joined to the Great Story. The Presence is in the bread and wine, in the Spirit who hovers here, and in all of you gathered today, who are truly the celebrants. When we are here, we are not merely eating the bread and drinking the wine and remembering Jesus. He is here, because when we hear the presider say the words of institution, when Jesus says “Take eat, this is my body, and drink this, the blood of the New Covenant,” that time becomes our time, it is here, and Jesus is here in the power of God! Our story is the story of all the followers of Jesus, in kairos time. All is holy, the bread, the wine,

the words, us, the time, the story. And when we receive, we are filled and enabled to be messengers of the Good News in the world.

For the sacrament is not just for us alone, to nourish us, but to be shared with a hungry and thirsty world. Go out, now, and break the bread of compassion, of God's peace and reconciliation, with those in your life, and dare to move outside your usual circles to honor Christ in others different from yourself. Share the unconditional love of God for all people, which is truly the bread of life come down from heaven! Amen.