

Homily: August 18, 2024
Proper 15: The thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Anne's and Emmanuel Episcopal Churches
The Rev. David W. Perkins, Th.D.

The Mystery of the Eucharist
John 6:51-58

Poet Frank Gasper gives us these lines from his poem “The One God is Mysterious”

**The one God is mysterious
and He has made me crazy. ***

Jesus' hearers in today's Gospel might well have said, **“Jesus is mysterious and he is making us crazy.”** John quotes Jesus as saying the hearers must eat his flesh. The reaction of the Jews to those words (6:52) was a question: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

In our reading Jesus responds to their question. We note that he does not really answer the “how” question; instead, he presents mysteries even harder to grasp and to endure—“eat my flesh and drink my blood.” Perhaps Jesus responds to some of our questions about the “how” of mysteries in a similar fashion. He makes it even more difficult for us to accept mysteries that remain impenetrable.

Let's focus on that question, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

How?

We refer to the sacraments as mysteries and the Eucharist presents us with mystery. At a Wednesday lecture on the Episcopal Church, a person once asked, “Do Episcopalians believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist?” Our answer to that is, “Yes.” We teach and affirm that Jesus enters into the bread and wine; he comes to us under the signs of bread and wine. We receive him in the consumption of host and wine.

How? We have no adequate explanation. Theories abound. But, in faith, we eat and drink and pray, “Be known to me/us in the breaking of bread.” **Origen said in the third century that Jesus' presence in the Eucharist was akin to that of heat in an iron poker. The cold poker lacked that presence.** Origen offers us an analogy, imperfect and limited but still somewhat helpful. Nothing removes

the mystery. We know that God is present in all persons and in all things and places, but we believe that presence gets focused in bread and wine like you would focus the sun's rays with a magnifying glass. Jesus shows up under the signs of bread and wine.

This challenges our idolatry of the intellect—that we must understand to embrace. I find it humorous when parents say they don't want their children to receive communion yet because they don't understand. My response, "And, you do?"

The Eucharistic mystery points to a greater one. How God could enflesh Godself in a human life and come to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus, so human that no one saw deity during his lifetime. Yet, the disciples, on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit burst forth, could say: "We've felt this before. We've felt this in the presence of Jesus."

What this tells us at the least is that there is no basic enmity or incompatibility between flesh and spirit, between God and God's material creation. God is present in all things and all people. God played in the dust and made us (Genesis 2). God works in the material world As Dale Allison says, the world is "meta-normal," the divine lurks in the material world. Eucharist presumes that. God could enflesh Godself in a human life and Jesus can come to us in bread and wine.

Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest, in a delightful book, *The Astonished Heart*, puts it this way.

"The Eucharist . . . (to take the highest view of it), is precisely a sacrament. It's not a transaction--not the mixing up of a fresh batch of the body and blood of Jesus so we can reinsert him into our lives. Nor is it merely a reminder of some wonderful things that a onetime Jesus did for us a great many Fridays and Sundays ago. It's the real presence, under the signs of bread and wine, of the Jesus who has indwelt all our lives, in all his power, all along." +

How Can This Man Give Us His Flesh?

In Hebrew idiom "flesh and blood" is a metaphor for a person, for the self. Hebrew has no word for body. Jesus is saying that he gives himself and that we receive him in the eating and drinking. The incarnate Jesus comes to us in bread and wine.

Do we dare believe that God is a giver, that God lavishes gifts and Godself and Christ upon us? Dare we believe it because we must relinquish control. If God gives lavishly, out of grace, not according to our deserving, then we cannot control that giving by what we do.

In creation: Not only the bread of God comes down from heaven, but the water that flows from the tap, the calories and protein in our black-eyed peas, and the cotton that rubs so coolly against our skin. The iron salts and mineral spring 3 miles from my GA home flows a gallon a minute—it's free and I filled my six gallon jug for coffee and drinking. God is a giver.

In salvation: God gave us Christ. Jesus lavished himself upon us by living and dying and rising to forgive and transform us and break the hold of death upon us. Jesus gave himself, he poured out his blood—not literally meant; rather, his life offered—for our salvation. “The bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world,” Jesus says in John 6.

In the Eucharist. Jesus becomes present in bread and wine and lavishes himself upon us. We don't harvest or mill the wheat or bake the bread or vint the wine. These are gifts to us. Jesus desires to give himself freely to us, to nourish us. God is a giver. God's life comes to us in the wheat and in the grape. Henri J. M. Nouwen in a book of meditations on the Eucharist, based on the Emmaus passage in Luke 24, says:

"Jesus is God-for-us, God-with-us, God-within-us. Jesus is God giving himself completely, pouring himself out for us without reserve. Jesus doesn't hold back or cling to his own possessions. He gives all there is to give. 'Eat, drink, this is my body, this is my blood . . . this is me for you!'" #

How Can This man Give Us His Flesh To Eat?

In the Eucharist, Christ comes to us as a sacrament of grace. His real presence is there. We receive him by eating and drinking. However, in John 6, Jesus says, “He who eats my flesh abides in me and I in him.” So, there is more to feeding on Christ than eating and drinking.

The Eucharist takes us back to the human Jesus. We are to receive him as a person, just like we receive the bread and wine into our bodies. We are to have a personal relationship with him, a daily relationship of, as the prayer book says,

“feeding on him in our hearts by faith.” We exercise trust in and dependence on Jesus when we receive him by faith for the forgiveness of sins and are converted. We continue to live by that same faith, the faith that only Jesus can satisfy the deepest longings of the human spirit, only Jesus can forgive us and give us life.

This relational focus gives us a reminder that the heart of our faith is not the ideas we hold but the relationship in which we abide and in which God holds us.

Eucharist brings us into greater intimacy with Jesus and our conversion continues. Eucharist nurtures the relationship. In the Eucharist, we telescope our entire Christian experience. All of life is a feeding on Christ in our hearts, an abiding in him and he in us. And, it is a feeding together, in community. The feeding creates community, creates loving bonds among us, as does regular eating together in a home.

These powerful signs—bread and wine—are for all people; we are worshipping as a public assembly in the world with permeable boundaries. Normally people come into the church through baptism and then receive communion. However, what if an “outsider” is present today and finds these powerful signs appealing? Episcopal News Service carried a story several years ago about an Episcopal priest who had a golfing friend who was Jewish. One Sunday that friend came to the rail and the priest did what we are taught to do, he communed him. That person awakened to Christ became an Episcopalian and now is a priest.

If you are drawn to the altar, we do not say “do not come,” We say come, so long as you understand that you may awaken to Christ’s love here for the first time and be called to follow him.

My Invitation to You

What can we say in response to this overflowing giving from God. I can only think of two words, “Thank you.”

If we are receiving the life-giving body and blood of Christ, the question presents itself, “How will I express Christ’s life-giving presence in my life this week?” We leave here full of the Christ who has come to us in bread and wine. Think of your heart as an oven. People will smell the freshness of that bread and be drawn toward the giver. Smelling fresh baked bread can awaken hunger you did not know you had. May something in our words, our attitude, our ways of relating, awaken people to the hunger for God that they carry unknowingly.

Mary Oliver's poem about Eucharist.
The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist

Something has happened
to the bread
and the wine.

They have been blessed.
What now?
The body leans forward

to receive the gift
from the priest's hand,
then the chalice.

They are something else now
from what they were
before this began.

I want
to see Jesus
maybe in the clouds
or on the shore,
just walking,
beautiful man

and clearly
someone else
besides.

On the hard days
I ask myself
if I ever will.

Also there are times
my body whispers to me
that I have.

Notes

- *Frank X Gasper, *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* (Farmington, ME: Alice James, 2004)
- +Robert F. Capon, *The Astonished Heart: Reclaiming the Good News from the Lost-and-Found of Church History* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1996), pp. 41-42.
- #[Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), p. 67.