



The Gift of the Eucharist

The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost - August 16, 2009

"The Gift of the Eucharist"

The Rev. Stephen Elkins-Williams

During the Prayer Book revision of the '60s and '70s, one of the great additions was an ecumenical three-year lectionary. Up until then only two readings, an Epistle and a Gospel, had been assigned for each Sunday and major feast and those on a one-year cycle. With the new lectionary, an Old Testament reading and a psalm were added; and with readings spread over a three-year cycle, we have been exposed to a much greater portion of the scriptures over the last three decades. For the most part, for example, we cover Matthew's Gospel in Year A, Mark's and some of John's in Year B (in which we are now), Luke's in Year C, and other parts of John's during special stretches of all three years.

There was some dissatisfaction with the Prayer Book lectionary, however, and after a time the Revised Common Lectionary was proposed. This lectionary kept the format of three readings and a psalm each Sunday, with many of the selections remaining the same over the three-year cycle as before. But instead of adjusting the Old Testament lesson each week to something that connected with the continuous Gospel readings, ongoing Old Testament readings were made available as well to help the listener catch the flow of that whole story instead of just a section of it. This summer, for example, we have been hearing the story of David in all his grace and sinfulness, a very important figure in our salvation history, through whom God worked to accomplish the Divine purpose.

The Revised Common Lectionary is now in use throughout the whole Episcopal Church as well as in other denominations. A major drawback is that you cannot simply turn to the back of the Prayer Book anymore and determine what the assignments are for a given day; they may well have changed. But one positive result is that we are hearing some portions of scripture that we may not have heard read in church before — and sermons based on them. I hope many of you were the beneficiaries of Tammy's sermons on consecutive Sundays recently comparing South Carolina Governor Sanford's well-publicized transgressions with those of David (actually much more nuanced than that!) and helping us think through the depiction of a seemingly vengeful God. These are powerful Bible stories that still engage us and have much to teach us.

One advantage of any lectionary, of course, is that those assigned to preach are prevented from simply choosing their favorite passages to speak on every week. The congregation is less likely to be captive to the same old tired themes! The preacher is free, of course, to base the sermon on any of the three assigned scripture readings or the psalm or a combination of them. While the Gospel is probably the focus of most sermons, last week Vicky emphasized the Epistle reading, written to the Ephesians, about expressing our anger in love. The two weeks before that Tammy, as I said, spoke from the Old Testament lessons.

You may or may not have noticed then, that this is the fourth Sunday in a row (with one more to go) in which the Gospel is taken from the sixth chapter of John, the famous "Bread of Life" discourse. Some of us had hoped that the Revised Common Lectionary might also change this rather monotonous stretch of similar Gospel readings — including, by the way, our organist/choirmaster who picks the hymns and who always dreads every third summer having to stretch the finite repertoire of Eucharistic hymns over such a long period! But no such luck! Wouldn't you know that this is one set of readings that did not get altered! Since, however, you have not heard yet during this liturgical cycle any development on this very important, if repetitious, proclamation of Jesus as the bread of life, let me say a few words about that today.

"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." Those were shocking words to Jesus' followers, not just to his critics, but to his disciples. Scripture forbade them to consume the blood of animals, considered the *nephesh* or life force. How could this mad man, then, demand they eat human

flesh and drink human blood? As we will hear next week, many of his disciples left Jesus over this very difficult truth.

The Twelve did not, however, and through the experiences of the Last Supper and of Jesus' death and resurrection appearances, they and the others who began to form the early Church came to understand the gift Jesus gave them in the Eucharist. "Do this in remembrance of me," he had told them. Almost immediately, they realized that taking and blessing and breaking and giving the bread and sharing the cup, as Jesus had done, was a unique way to celebrate Jesus' life and presence among them. "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup," Paul taught the early Christians in Corinth, "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I. Cor. 11:26).

How this mystery happens, we cannot understand, but we do realize that this sacrament has been of basic importance to the Church over all cultures for nearly two thousand years. As Madeleine L'Engle has written, "Nothing important is completely explicable." Even so, generation after generation of Christians have found strength and solace and connection with God and with others through this profound sacrament, which we refer to as communion. Through participation in "the breaking of the bread," we both effect and signify our union with God and with one another and the reality that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Although we cannot explain it, that is not magic, that is not make-believe, that is real.

And "real presence" is the term that Anglicans and Episcopalians have used over the centuries to describe our belief in the Eucharist. We believe that Jesus is really present in the celebration of communion. We do not try to define how. We do not use any particular philosophical approach to reality to explain this mystery. As Richard Hooker wrote over four hundred years ago, "Let it therefore be sufficient for me presenting myself at the Lord's Table, to know what I receive from Him, without search or enquiry of the manner how Christ performeth his promises." Thomas Aquinas, three centuries earlier, put it this way, in what became part of #314 in our hymnal (which begins, "Humbly I adore thee"), "Taste and touch and vision to discern thee fail; faith, that comes by hearing, pierces through the veil. I believe whate'er the Son of God hath told; what the Truth hath spoken, that for truth I hold."

I referred earlier to the gift of the Eucharist. And what an extraordinary gift it is! Each of us, just as we are, with all our fears and scars and doubts and sinfulness, comes forward to receive this life-giving gift, with no conditions or demands attached to it. All of us together set aside our petty bickering and our disagreements and our real or imagined rifts, and opening up our hands we are all blessed with the gift of the self-giving God who calls us beyond our narrow vision and obstinacy to embrace all people as our brothers and sisters. In a ritual that transcends explanation and even moves us beyond our imaginations, we receive the transformed elements and are ourselves transformed into the unified Body of Christ. In the concluding words of today's communion hymn (#302), "As grain, once scattered on the hillsides, was in this broken bread made one, so from all lands thy Church be gathered into thy kingdom by thy Son."

John 6:51-58