

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15)
August 15, 2021

Lectionary Year B: John 6:51-58

When you think about it, most of us have lived a pretty happy life as Christians -- never having had to worry about persecution or endangerment of life or property because of our faith. Contrast this to Christianity's origins in the Roman Empire, where it was illegal to follow anything other than the officially endorsed religion, which borrowed heavily from the polytheism of ancient Greece -- gods and goddesses and so on if you remember your history well enough.

Based on scant evidence, Roman authorities deemed Christianity false and disobedient to the Empire, and looked for ways to discredit and persecute the early Christians. One accusation hurled at them from the authorities was that of cannibalism...the actual consumption of human bodies by other humans. Did early Christians actually practice cannibalism? Of course not. But could such an idea have made it out into the general public back then? Most certainly.

The accusation of cannibalism came -- primarily but not exclusively -- from a misconstruing of the regular celebration of the Eucharist. Early Christians were not permitted to celebrate their rites and ceremonies openly, so only full-fledged members of the church really knew what went on when they gathered, and they were in the minority. Whatever floated around in the general public

and made it to the authorities was far from firsthand information. And what could be more provocative than a small, underground gathering of folks who "ate body" and "drank blood"?

The Eucharist -- or Holy Communion or Lord's Supper -- is the earliest regular celebration of the Christian faith. The Book of Acts recalls accordingly: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). But this breaking of bread was not merely dining...it was a participation in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ whereby the gathered assembly received their Lord's Body and Blood. No, it wasn't a weekly dinner party; indeed, this obscure, mystical imagery aroused much suspicion and led outsiders to think that something mighty unseemly was going on!

Once Christianity "went public" -- when it finally became legal for Christians to practice their faith openly -- the accusation of cannibalism, in particular, was found to be groundless. But the Eucharist remained with its language of body and blood and urged its recipients to eat and drink. Even though there have been adaptations and changes to the church's practice throughout the centuries, the basic substance of the eucharistic meal remains. It is the communication of the promise of Christ -- forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation -- through earthly, tangible, edible, and drinkable means.

While there are very well-informed and scholarly people who argue that the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John is not to be limited

to a "eucharistic" interpretation, its eucharistic motifs are still undeniable. When Jesus says "I am the living bread that came down from heaven" (6:51a) and we come forward for Communion, we can't help but make the connection. That's just the way it is.

But, as would be the case with the Romans, Jesus confounded the Jews, as well. Recall Jesus' words and the reaction to them:

"Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (6:51b). And then -- all too prescient of the accusation of cannibalism to come -- the following question is raised by the Jews: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52b).

The Jews are right...it sounds kind of gross, doesn't it?

But Jesus persists in making his point nonetheless. His body and blood is, indeed, to be consumed. While there is no account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John, we still hear words that echo "this is my body" and "this is my blood." Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink" (6:53-55).

Should we be told that the Sacrament of Holy Communion is a mere "symbol" of Christ's Body and Blood, we need only remember that Jesus tells us that his flesh and blood are true food and true drink; indeed, what we receive in this meal is nothing other than

Christ's own promise. To degrade these holy things to the status of mere symbols is to deny this promise. In this event, Christ is what he says he is, and as he comes to us today, we taste and see and eat and drink and discover the One who gives us his very own self. We partake of the very forgiveness that he himself offered once and for all on the cross.

It shouldn't be too much of a stretch to see how a broken body and shed blood finds its way from the cross to the Holy Table...

On a related note, Scott Hendrix, who taught Reformation history when I was attending seminary in Pennsylvania, once said in a lecture that we have the Sacrament of Holy Communion to communicate the benefits of the cross to us. That said, another glance at John 6 provides further food for thought (pun intended). If the cross is the way to forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, surely the cross cannot remain stranded in history; its flesh-and-blood reality comes from the same Person in the same form as Jesus says in the sixth chapter of John. Hear Jesus' words again: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life" (6:54a).

But this flesh and blood is, through our interpretive glasses, that of the cross and resurrection. Surely, the eating and drinking to which Jesus refers is that which the Christian community does subsequent to the cross and resurrection. You see, Christ's promise extends beyond the events of Golgotha and the empty tomb, so that when he says "the bread that I will give for the life of

the world is my flesh" (6:51b), he is anticipating the sacrifice of the cross. And now this Bread of Life -- by virtue of Christ's sacrifice -- comes to us in our celebration of the Eucharist today.

And we affirm in our understanding of the Eucharist the reality of Christ's presence in the bread and wine. While the various groups across the Catholic and Protestant spectrum disagree as to the specifics of this reality, our Anglican heritage displays relative conservatism in its doctrine. We believe that Christ really meant what he said in the words "this is my body" and "my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink" (6:55), thus making any sort of symbolic or strictly memorial understanding of the Sacrament impossible.

Now, as we well know, conversations about the Eucharist (particularly about sharing the Eucharist) often reach an impasse with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. However, we need to remember that we are among the oldest branches off the Catholic tree and that Catholics are our closest kin (but sometimes the closest of kin can still be thousands of miles away). I would also point out that our forebears in the English Reformation did not eviscerate the Lord from the Lord's Supper, but rather spoke of the Lord's presence in the Supper more simply. But as we continue to converse with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters on this matter, we need to acknowledge that our differences are semantic, not essential. We can confidently say that the Eucharist "does" what it needs to do when we Episcopalians celebrate it; we differ only

when it comes to how we speak of it!

To this effect, the great Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner once wrote: "The first truth of Eucharistic doctrine is, 'This is my body', not 'Here I am present'." That's a marvelously simple way of highlighting first our agreement that Christ's words really mean what they say, while very appropriately giving the "mechanics" of Christ's presence a lower priority. Yes, the "mechanics" are what we disagree on, but they need not forever separate us at the Table!

Thankfully, though, the promise of Christ through the Sacrament of Holy Communion remains what it is...the very stuff that we eat and drink unto salvation. Jesus says, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day" (6:54). Regardless of differences in doctrine or other hair-splitting matters, and regardless of Christianity's persecutors who cried "Cannibalism!" at the words body and blood, we continue to gather around the same Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation that Christians have for two millennia. And Christ will never stop coming to us -- whether through his promise or whether in bread and wine -- which will, indeed, continue until that moment when we finally come to him on the last day.

We can surely eat and drink to that!

Amen.