

14th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)

August 25, 2024

Holy Family Episcopal Church, Laurel Springs, NJ

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

Jesus said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me."

Because of all the "bread" and "eat my flesh" and "drink my blood" that has been so prevalent in this summer's lectionary, I was reminded at coffee hour last week that the early Christians were accused of cannibalism. And then on Monday morning as I began to prepare today's sermon, this is the gospel reading that I encountered. John wasn't kidding when he retold that disciples found this teaching difficult when they heard it. Really? What am I supposed to do with this? It took me a couple days to try to "digest it" – ha ha, but I did have some insight that I would like to share with you this morning.

For a minute, I would like you to think about all of our modern conveniences. Each of them are designed for a specific purpose. A washing machine washes clothes. A vacuum cleaner cleans your carpets. If you put dishes into the washing machine it's not very effective. Likewise if you vacuum your lawn, that doesn't really work either.

In much the same way, humans are designed for one specific purpose. When we set ourselves to the task for which we were designed, everything goes miraculously well: all seems right with the world. But when we forget what we are designed and created for, everything goes completely haywire and things don't go well. We cannot live in ignorance of the ultimate point of our lives.

What we are made for, the basic function of a human being, is LOVE, and more specifically the love of God. We are designed for a loving friendship with our Creator, but we don't come to this through either casually treating God like a buddy, or by working to convince him that we are amazing. Instead, we come into this loving relationship through receiving this world -all that we are and all that we have-as gifts from God, for we can only truly know God through thanksgiving. We can give

thanks, not because God either needs our praise or appreciates the occasional pat on the back and “Yay God!”, but because God commands us to do so not for his own sake, but for ours.

Let’s go back to the Garden of Eden for a second. There, all things were given by God to Adam and Eve-the entire world, all food, everything-was a direct gift from God to his beloved creatures; everything they had was a sign of God’s love and blessing.

The value of each bite of food was the fact that it revealed God’s love to them, God’s care for them. The nourishment they received which made their body strong, that stopped their hunger, was a secondary experience-the main experience was always of being loved. The world was valuable, not as a comfortable place to sleep or a beautiful sunset, but every single person, place, and thing was an overwhelming experience of their communion with God.

In all of the Garden of Eden, there was only one object that God did not give the humans, -the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything else was a gift, a window into the glory of God, but because the tree was not given it could be seen not as a revelation or a blessing but as something to be obtained in and of itself. And because they could not have it, they seem to want it desperately.

Adam and Eve cast everything aside and took that one thing -simply because they wanted it and couldn’t have . This is what we as humans have been doing ever since. Now when we grab a sandwich, it’s not to feel God’s love for us but to stop our stomachs from grumbling. When it is payday and we are given our check, we aren’t overwhelmed by thankfulness to God. We look to see how much has been deducted and we think about how hard we worked to earn it.

We have lost the ability to commune with God through thanksgiving. We have forgotten to look around and to see what He is doing for us from day to day, from second to second. He doesn’t just give us food and homes and friends and families, but he gives us the breath of life, mental faculties, voices to praise him, hands with which to serve him. We need to realize that nothing would be of value in and of itself, but the chief value of everything would come as a revelation of God’s love and blessings to us.

And so today, Jesus comes to the disciples and says, if you are too blind to see me and all that I gave you, if you won’t see my loving all that you have, and I give you my self – my own body and blood. Unless you eat in thanksgiving, you will have no life in you. And the disciples say, “Give us your... What?! This sounds bizarre!This doesn’t make any sense. They say, “this teaching is difficult, who can except it?” And the gospel writer goes on to tell us, “Because of this many of his disciples turn back and no longer went about with him.” This teaching that Christ would give us his actual

flesh , his actual blood – it was gross, it was weird, it was utterly incomprehensible, and then he gave up being his disciples altogether.

“Eucharist“ in Greek literally means “thanksgivings“. It is the act of taking the ordinary food that God has blessed us with, our ordinary daily bread and wine, and sacrificing it – giving it back to God to show our praise and thanksgiving to him. When we make sacrifices to God, we give of our time, when we give of our wealth, when we return our daily bread to him, it is not something that we do for his benefit, but for ourselves: we force ourselves to return to right relationship– to the true thankfulness that is the only perspective from which we can know God.

God receives our gifts and pours out the Holy Spirit upon them, and the ordinary bread and wine of our sacrifice become the body and blood of Christ. Jesus said those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.“ Through our act of thanksgiving, through our Eucharist, we come into the presence of this flesh and blood, and when we eat of it, we begin to abide in Christ, and he in us, and we in the Father through him.

But the Eucharist is not a simple status change. You don’t receive Holy Communion and return to your regular old life. Instead, we have to be open to the grace of the sacrament, we have to allow God’s grace to shape us, to transform us into Eucharistic beings: into Christians who give thanks to God in all times and in all places.

Many in the church are unable to receive the Eucharist often because they may be homebound or their parish may be without a priest. There are some who still have not physically received the Eucharist because there are still places that are recovering from the pandemic and the customary use of online worship that it has created. But the frequency of our actual physical reception of consecrated bread and wine is not what makes a Eucharistic life. Instead it is being for others a vision of the grace of God, the peace of God, the joy of God in living a life of thanksgiving.

You stop at a traffic light and see a homeless man waving a sign, and think, “This is awkward, now I have to avoid eye contact with him for the next 30 seconds, or worse I have to give him a dollar, just not to feel guilty.“ Or you can pray, “What a blessing that I get to serve as Christ hands in this moment, that I get to share Christ’s love through a simple dollar.”

You encounter your always furious neighbor who seems to do nothing but seethe and post nutty political rants on social media. You can think, “Here we go again. I’m going to do what I can to ignore this moron.” Or you can pray “Thank you God, for bringing me together with my brother. May I be to him an oasis of your peace, a messenger of your grace.”

You can go into your home or a doctors appointment, into work or the grocery store, either thinking about your own goals, your own concerns, or you can allow the Eucharist to form you, allow eternal life to shape you – you can see every single thing in your life as an overwhelming sign of God’s infinite love for you and give thanks. In doing so you will abide in Christ and he in you. In so doing, he will allow eternal life to take root in you. Through this you begin to live, not only on earth but in heaven, for this is eternal life – this is what those in heaven experience. It is a constant revelation of God’s love, a constant overwhelming experience of God’s infinite goodness.

Will you be like Adam and Eve, will you be like those disciples who rejected the body and blood of Christ, or will you will allow the transformation that God has begun in you to shape your life, and make every moment and experience one of the love of God? May you experience that transformative love In all times and in all places. Amen