

Proper 15B 2021 RCL  
Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58  
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This morning's gospel is the end of a long chapter in John about Jesus, the Bread of Life. At the beginning of this chapter, we hear the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Then Jesus speaks of himself as the bread of life coming down from heaven in a way that emphasizes us coming into relationship with him and listening to his teaching. Then today, he talks in a very physical and somewhat unsettling way about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Such talk would have been abhorrent to Jewish teaching and practice, as it is to most enlightened civilizations. We also know of no one physically eating Jesus following this discussion, and next week we'll hear the consequences of this scandalous-seeming talk. Jesus wouldn't have said something so problematic if it wasn't important, so we should take the time to understand what he is saying and why.

We probably recognize much of this language as similar to the language we use in the Eucharist. John's gospel does not include a section on the Eucharist during the last supper. Instead, he places Jesus' Eucharistic instruction as part of the follow-up to a feeding miracle. We'll come back and talk in a few minutes about why this placement is important. Let's start with understanding what Jesus is saying here about what the Eucharist is.

The language of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood is intense language, and we need to make a few distinctions. First, Jesus does not mean this literally. Literal would mean that the disciples would be taking bites of Jesus's arms, and that is not the point. Second, Jesus' words are not ONLY symbolic or metaphorical. A symbol or metaphor would mean that Jesus is discussing things that help us understand some concept he is trying to describe, but the intention stops there. A metaphor would be when Jesus says that "The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed." Thinking about a mustard seed is helpful to us, but it is a symbol. If that was all the Kingdom of God is, I'm not sure I'm interested -- no one really wants to spend eternal life in a mustard seed. What Jesus is saying does help us think about a deeper reality, but it does NOT stop there. Instead, Jesus is talking about something real. When we are talking about the eucharist, we are really talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, just not in a literal way. The way this really happens is by being a SACRAMENT. A sacrament moves us from a symbolic level to a real level.

Perhaps one of the most useful definitions of a sacrament is something that accomplishes what it signifies and signifies what it accomplishes. In baptism, we are sprinkled with water as a sign of our cleansing from sin and our entrance into the household of God. When this symbolic act happens, it no longer becomes a symbol of our entrance, but we actually become cleansed from sin and part of God's people. In marriage, two people make a vow to join their lives together, and then they are joined. These real change occurs because Jesus has been a part of sacraments during his ministry and blessed us with the capacity to use these symbolic acts to accomplish their intention.

In the eucharist, the sacramental act of eating bread and drinking wine offered through our liturgy results in our really eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus. As Anglicans, we don't go into great philosophical detail about how that happens, although any number of plausible explanations have been presented by different tribes of Christianity at different times. What matters is that in the Eucharist, Jesus is really present, and that eating Jesus' flesh in this real way means that we will live forever because we have been joined to the Body of Christ. We abide in Jesus as Jesus abides in the Father. We are also reconstituted as the Body of Christ with Jesus as the head and all the other members of the body around us and in the church throughout the world at all times and all places. All of these very important things happen in the Eucharist because it is real and sacramental.

We need to hold onto the reality of the sacrament of Eucharist. Deciding to make it more palatable, if you will, as merely a symbol or a metaphor is not robust enough to ground important Christian theology and ethics. The reality of the Eucharist as our physical selves eating the flesh and blood of Jesus and having eternal life means that the life of this world matters and that our salvation is about our whole person and not some ghost-like existence.

Jesus language of flesh in this passage is important because it harkens back to the first chapter of John's gospel when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The incarnation means that the Son of God traveled from some sort of spiritual reality, that we usually think of God inhabiting, into the reality of human existence with its troubling physicality and the limits of our humanity including the limit of death. The language here is that the Word, the existence of the Son of God that is beyond the physical, becomes flesh, which is the existence of the Son of God in the fully-human person of Jesus Christ. The point of the incarnation is for our salvation, the salvation of fully-human, physical persons. The Eucharist is a key mechanism that allows us in our flesh to be connected to Jesus in his flesh. By connecting with Jesus, flesh-to-flesh, we become one with him, which means that we can be assured of resurrection life in our flesh just as Jesus now has a resurrected perfected physical body, and that we are also connected through Jesus to all others connected to him in the Body of Christ. We are not only connected to Jesus through the Word. The Word is important—we do connect to Jesus through the Word, which is why we hear scripture readings and sermons explaining them every week. Jesus' Word does give life, just like conversations with friends are life-giving and necessary. And at some point our bodies need to have lunch, too, which is why conversations over meals are so good for us. Our full relationship with Jesus will also include both Jesus' words and the eucharistic meal.

The implications of the real connection to Jesus' real flesh in the Eucharist are profoundly important. If our physical bodies become part of Jesus' body, even if we don't quite understand how it all happens, then we have to take bodies seriously – our own and others. We have eternal life in our flesh, not just in some spiritualized ghostly essence that might survive after we die. Our bodies are meant for resurrection. Resurrection means that how we treat ourselves and others has eternal consequences. Remember how Jesus could show his friends the holes in his hands and his side. These wounds didn't seem to hurt anymore, and we are assured of no more pain or suffering on the other side of death. Yet, what happens now still matters somehow.

Remember how John's gospel places Jesus' discussion of the Eucharist after a feeding miracle? This placement highlights the important connection between Eucharist and caring for each other.

Eucharist isn't just something isolated with Jesus' closest friends, even though it does begin in that context. Receiving the Eucharist connects us physically with others. The real fleshy salvation that comes through the Eucharist means that we have to be concerned with caring for the physical needs of others. The hungry have to be fed. The naked need to be clothed. The sick need to be healed, and precautions need to be taken to prevent the spread of disease. We need to do those things in our power to mitigate the climate change which is causing in direct physical harm to the millions of people vulnerable to rising water levels, extreme weather events, dangerous fires, food and water shortages, and other tragic results. And we need to take seriously our attitudes and treatment of the bodies of others, which informs our response to racism and sexual abuse and harassment. All of these ethical imperatives matter, and our understanding of the uniting of our flesh with Jesus' and with one another's in the Eucharist provides the bedrock foundation for loving our neighbor as ourselves. It is no accident that our Anglican and Episcopal traditions that take the reality of the Eucharist seriously are also so concerned with issues of social justice.

We have just heard the gift of Jesus' words. In a few minutes, we will respond to his invitation to eat his flesh in a sacramental and real way. Then we will be dismissed to go out to love and serve the Lord, meaning that we will care for the flesh and blood of our other human beings in whatever ways we can.