

Proper 15B 2015 Sermon

August 16, 2015

John 6:51-58

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "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. 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. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

“You are what you eat.” It is a phrase famously said by 19th Century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach in advocating materialism and atheism. There is no need to attribute anything spiritual to human beings, argued Feuerbach, for we are simply the sum total of what we eat! Now, on the physical, cellular level the statement “You are what you eat” can hardly be disputed. It has been estimated that in an adult human body, 1 million cells die and are replaced each second, and the molecules needed to build those new cells come from the food we eat, so in a real sense we **are** what we eat.

Feuerbach was trying to make a case **against** Christianity by pointing out our material nature. But if he had bothered to study in depth John’s Gospel, he would see that John **agrees** that we humans have a material nature – AND our material nature is also indwelt by God. In the first Chapter of his Gospel, John writes, “And the Word became flesh...” (John 1:14) Eternal Spirit became one with what is material and physical in what Christians call “The Incarnation”.

And it is this incarnational aspect of the Christian faith that John emphasizes in our Gospel lesson this morning, using powerful and shocking language. Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...” This was a hard statement for Jesus’ listeners to stomach, and John tells us that “The Jews ...disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’” And drink his blood? The Jewish Law forbade any Jew from eating meat with any blood in it at all (no rare steaks for Kosher Jews!). No wonder the Jews “disputed among themselves” – this was crude and scandalous language! In fact, a few verses after today’s Gospel passage, we find that Jesus’ own *disciples* have a hard time with this language, and some even stopped following Jesus because of it! (John 6:60-66)

And yet I am convinced that the parallel between eating food and having the molecules of the food truly become us and eating Christ and having his life become our life is not a *loose* parallel, but very real and organic. “Just as ...I live because of the Father,” Jesus says in today’s Gospel, “so whoever eats me will live because of me.” Jesus is speaking of a very real incorporation of his being into our being, in much the same way food becomes our bodies. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (2:19b-20) Paul truly *had* taken Christ into himself, and he lived because of the Christ-life in him!

Now, putting food into our mouths and swallowing it begins an *automatic* process of changing the food into the cells of our bodies. We don’t have to *think* about digestion; it just happens. But consuming Christ in the Eucharist and digesting his life so that *His* life becomes *our* life is **not** so automatic. Something needs to happen for the transformation to take place. What is it? Do we have to understand and believe what is happening in the Eucharist before it can transform us? Certainly, understanding and belief can help. But what Richard Rohr and others suggest is even *more* important is coming to communion with a hunger to be fed with the food of Christ, and being fully present ourselves to the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

“Eucharist is [**our**] presence encountering [**God’s**] Presence,” Fr. Rohr states. “[It is] mutuality, vulnerability. There is nothing to prove, to protect, or to sell [in the Eucharist]. It feels so empty, naked, and harmless, that all you can **do** is be present. The Eucharist is telling us that God is the food and all we have to do is provide the hunger. Somehow we have to make sure that each day we are hungry, that there’s room inside of us for another presence. If you are filled with your own opinions, ideas, righteousness, superiority, or sufficiency, you are a world unto yourself and there is no room for ‘another.’ ...

“All my life as a Catholic,” Fr. Rohr continues, “I have believed that the Real Presence of Christ **is** in the Eucharist. *Now I also* recognize that the very concept of *presence* is inherently and necessarily *relational*. We Catholics can defend the doctrine of the Real Presence all we want (and I do), but if we don’t teach the children of God how to be *present to [God’s] Presence*, there **is** no Real Presence for them!” And this relational nature of being mutually present extends to the other people with whom we are worshiping! Holy Communion is never just between an individual and Christ. St. Paul says that those who receive Holy Communion without recognizing the Body (which means the rest of the members of the Church) bring judgment upon ourselves. (1 Cor. 11:29)

Another important function of the Eucharist is that it brings a universal reality into a single, particular event, so that if we can believe it in this one instance, we can believe it is true everywhere and at all times. “In the Eucharist,” Fr. Rohr states, “we slowly learn how to surrender to the Presence [of God] in **one** place, in **one** thing, in **one** focused moment. The priest holds up the Host [the bread] and

says, ‘See [the Presence of God] here, believe it here, get it here, trust it here.’ Many people say they believe it here, but they don’t make the transference to everywhere—which is the whole point! They don’t seem to know how to recognize the Presence [of God] when they leave the church, when they meet people who are of a different religion or race or somehow strangers.”

This is a crucial point: for the meaning of the Eucharist is not that Christ is present in the bread and wine, but rather that Christ, who is present in bread and wine, is taken into ourselves so that we are transformed into Christ and take Christ into the world!

Richard Hooker, the foundational theologian of Anglicanism, said, “The real presence of Christ’s most precious Body and Blood is not to be sought for in the Sacrament, but in the worthy receiver of the Sacrament.” Richard Rohr says that if we leave the altar rail after receiving communion and bow to the altar or genuflect as we re-enter our pew, we have missed the point: The sacrament is now in you, in me! Having eaten Christ, he is within us, has become part of us, and continuing to bow to Christ in the bread and wine “out there,” *outside of ourselves*, is to intimate that we did not receive him in the bread and wine and were not ourselves transformed, which is the very reason for the Eucharist!

“The Eucharist is an encounter of the heart,” says Fr. Rohr, “knowing [God’s] Presence through our available presence. In the Eucharist, we move beyond mere words and thinking with the rational mind and go to that place where we don’t *talk* about the Mystery anymore; we begin to **chew** on it. [In fact, the original Greek word in today’s Gospel is not ‘eat’ but ‘chew’ or ‘gnaw’.] Jesus did not say, ‘Think about this more’ or ‘stare at this;’ he said, ‘[Chew or gnaw] this!’ It was to be an action.

“We must move our knowing to the bodily, cellular, participative, unitive level. Then we keep eating and drinking the Mystery, until one day it dawns on us in an undefended moment, ‘My God, I really am what I eat!’”

The Body and Blood of Christ: Behold who you are, become what you receive. Then you really will be what you eat.

AMEN

(quotes taken or adapted from Richard Rohr’s talk *Eucharist as Touchstone* [CD](#), [MP3 download](#))