

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
August 16, 2009  
Pentecost 11  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Proverbs 9:1-6  
Psalm 147  
Ephesians 5:15-20  
John 6:53-59

The New Testament is filled with images and analogies describing the close relationship of believers with Christ. There is the image of the shepherd and the sheep. There is the image of the vine and the branches. There is the image of the bridegroom and the bride. There is the image of the head and the body.

But our Gospel lesson today perhaps pushes such images to the limit, as it speaks of eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood. Jesus says: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you." Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them at the last day" (John 6:53-54)

What does Jesus mean by this statement?

This statement has been heavily debated by biblical scholars throughout the history of the Church. Some believe that this statement is a graphic metaphor for believing in Christ and accepting him into your life -- almost as if it were describing an "evangelical conversion" or "born again experience." To eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood is to repent, to receive Christ's forgiveness, and by faith to be made new.

This is certainly one valid way to understand Jesus' statement here, and no doubt has truth to it.

Another way of understanding Jesus' words, which became prominent in the early Church, was to see his words here in terms of the Eucharist. A casual reading of the early Church Fathers reveals this development of thought.

It is not entirely unwarranted that the early Church (and many who followed) came to read Jesus' words here as referring to the Eucharist, for many reasons.

First, this passage in John is a "Passover" story. Jesus' words occur within the context of the approaching Passover celebration. Jesus' death is always an underlying theme in John's Gospel, but there is an added feature here.

For John, Jesus did not merely *keep* the Passover, Jesus *was* the Passover. He did not merely *eat* the Passover meal; he *was* the Passover meal, the food and drink. ("Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.")

John, with his penchant for double meanings, saw in the Last Supper a sign of a greater truth -- that Jesus himself *is* the bread, the Word of revelation from God that gives life to the world.

This image of Jesus being the bread was then joined with the common understanding that eating and drinking are the epitome of intimacy and union. And

so Jesus' words here became linked to the Eucharist, because in the Eucharist Christ offers to persons the benefit of his perfect, once-for-all sacrifice at Calvary.

There is another reason the early Church saw Jesus' words eucharistically. It has to do with the close connection Christ mentions between the activity of eating and drinking his flesh and blood and fellowship with Christ.

Jesus says, "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *remain* in me, and I in them." This word "remain" is the term "abide," and in John's Gospel this term describes a continued relationship of the closest, most intimate sort. It is the relationship of uninhibited trust, a relationship which is continually being nurtured and developed.

It is not surprising, then, that the term Jesus uses for eating/drinking his flesh and blood (v. 54) implies a *continual* process, a *habitual* feasting, as opposed to a "one time" event or something completed in time.

So, while the early Church came to understand Jesus' words here in terms of the Eucharist, is it appropriate for us to do so?

I think so, because in doing so we do not need to abandon the truth we saw earlier about believing in Christ and taking him into our inmost being.

But even if Jesus' words are a metaphor for a personal acceptance of Christ, it is also appropriate to understand them in terms of the Eucharist because through the Eucharist Christ encounters people and gives them grace. And even if eating

his flesh and drinking his blood is a metaphor for accepting Christ, that in itself implies the receiving of divine grace.

And how do we receive grace? Does it come to us in a purely inward and subjective way?

No. God has a rich history of encountering people through common, basic, ordinary and physical “stuff.” God’s way of dealing with people has usually been to encounter them in things they can see, touch, taste, and smell. Things like bread and wine.

John Wesley understood this. He believed that God could give grace to people any way he chose to do so *because he is God*. But Wesley acknowledged that the primary way God chooses to give grace to people is through simple, ordinary, visible channels.

These channels of divine grace included private and public prayer; searching and studying the Scriptures; small group accountability and fellowship; corporate worship services; family worship services; doing works of mercy, fasting, and others.

But one means of grace stood above the others. It was, for Wesley, the supreme way the life of God was nurtured in the souls of men and women and boys and girls. It was the supreme means given for persons to grow in grace, to abide in Christ, and to sense his abiding presence in them. It was the supreme

means for people to receive grace at their every point of need and at whatever stage they found themselves on their spiritual pilgrimage.

That one means, the means of grace *par excellence*, was the Lord's Supper. In it Christ was (and is) truly present, offering to people the benefits of his saving work and a pledge of his reign in its fullness.

The only possible response to God's grace given to us in this way is for us to offer up ourselves and our lives as living sacrifices, offerings of praise and thanksgiving to God. And this is exactly what we do, and what the liturgy helps us to do. ("And here we offer and present unto You, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable and lively sacrifice unto You...")

The early Church was accused of cannibalism at times because of its celebration of the Eucharist. People then, just as Jesus' original hearers, were unable to think on more than one level at a time. They were unable to probe beneath the literal surface and grasp the expansive power of metaphor.

We are not cannibals. We simply join with John and the early Fathers of the Church in stretching language to its limits to describe an intimacy with Jesus which ultimately is incapable of description. Words are inadequate.

But the grace we receive and which is beyond words is sure and real. It has the power to heal us, to change us, to make us whole, to help us love one another deeply and from the heart.

So come with faith, and feast on him in your hearts.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.