

“The Bread & Cup”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
March 4th, 2012©

Exodus 16:1-5

John 6:22-67

[Jesus said,]

*“For the Bread of God is that which comes down from Heaven
to give life to the world.”*

Then, they said to him,

“Lord, give us this bread all the time!”

John 6:22-67

Let us pray... O God,

Give us this day our daily bread – the food and shelter we need to survive.

And give us the ‘bread’ we need of your presence,
especially in community with others for our hearts to survive.

Amen

One of the most emotional passages in the Bible for me
is John 6:66-67 as it says in the KJV...

*From that time many of his disciples went back,
and walked no more with him.*

Then said Jesus unto the twelve, ‘Will [you] also go away?’

Can you imagine the loneliness of that moment?

It is as if Jesus is saying, “Will it all be for nothing?”

I believe that was Jesus’ greatest fear.

Isn’t that everybody’s fear – That nobody gets what you are about
and that what you did may just as well have not happened –
haven’t we all feared that at one time or another?

There is a scene in the film “About Schmidt”,

where a retired insurance man – played by Jack Nicholson,
drops by his old office at the invitation of the young man
who replaced him just to see how things are going.

He immediately is made to feel unwelcome and on the way out of the building,
he sees all of his files stacked in boxes – years of meticulous records,
caring for customers, now ready to go out with the trash.

Will they get it, or will it all be for nothing? That was Jesus’ fear.

Well, apparently somebody must have gotten it,
because we have Jesus’ story.

Willard, p.2

It has been passed on to us in the collection of writings we call the Bible
along with the traditions of regular Sunday worship and sacraments,
including baptism and holy communion.

The Gospel of John is filled with long speeches by Jesus that seem intended
to provide depth to the body of doctrine that Christianity would need
to compete with other religions and philosophies of that day.

The Church had gone 'international' – so to speak,
thanks to Roman roads and seaways,

but had yet to contend with the great religions of the East.

Jesus' exposition on the 'bread from heaven' is pretty dense stuff
like Einstein's theory of relativity in the form of a poem.

Much of that speech was not included in today's lesson for the sake of brevity
Still, you may wish to see for yourself, so check out John chapter 6
to spend a little more time with Jesus' words.

Jesus tells the crowd – that had intentionally sought him out for more food,
that the bread he has to offer is his own flesh
and furthermore, that the cup he offers to drink is of his blood.

This sounds to them like cannibalism – a universal taboo
that plays on the most basic terrors of human-kind.

Decent, law-abiding pagans of the Roman Empire were scandalized
by the accusations against Christians about their
'love feasts' and the ritual eating of their Savior's 'body and blood'.

Well, we know what that means, right?

But this led to terrible persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire
before that society eventually adopted Christianity for itself.

A thousand years later – around the time of the Crusades
and the violent clash between cultures,
medieval Christians turned these same accusations
against Jewish people presuming that the Jewish community
was committing acts of ritual murder
out of spite towards the dominant Christian community.

In his book, Toward a Definition of Antisemitism,

Gavin Langmuir makes the case that European Christians
struggled with what they had been taught about
the elements of Holy Communion—also called the Eucharist...

Willard, p.3

He wrote:

The primary explanation of this new hatred of Jews seems to be that many Christians were now plagued by a new kind of doubt, by conflicts between what they could or would know if they used their ability to think rationally and empirically and what they wanted to believe – for example, that Christ was really physically present in the Eucharist.

Of course, many people were able to face their religious doubts more or less directly or set them unthinkingly aside, and many were not fearful of the presence of Jews.

But many others could not or would not confront their doubts.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=3md6PVqRKTEC&pg=PA266&lpg=PA266&dq=jews+cannibals+accused&source=bl&ots=ncBxNuC91g&sig=CnczyY1vIKQo-8AwXDAd4nmijhg&hl=en&sa=X&ei=hjxST7HfMNSztwez-3SDQ&sqj=2&ved=0CDMQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=jews%20cannibals%20accused&f=false>

And so, they took their secret fears and projected them onto a convenient target – in that case, the Jewish community.

Isn't it the way we sometimes deal with unpleasant realities that provoke our doubts and fears?

Don't we suppress these doubts, but then look for the worst case scenario in someone else to be the target of our own frustration?

So, how do we as modern Christians come to terms with this particular ritual tradition?

What does the bread and cup mean to us as 21st people?

Why should we continue to observe Holy Communion?

Maybe something else Jesus said in John 14:20 can give us a clue:

... you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

Doesn't exactly clear it up, but Jesus' words speak of an interconnected relationship between the creature and the Creator and between one another.

We are already part of 'Christ's body' by baptism –

by receiving the bread and cup, we are reminded of that transformation.

The elements of bread and drink are said to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ,

but as food, they are also transformed into the body and blood of who we are.

Willard, p.4

For by this understanding, we are strengthened in our role
to be God's hands and feet, God's eyes and ears and voice in this world –
and God's Spirit of love becomes human, incarnate, in the flesh.

Maybe what we should say to each other at Communion is –
“Eat your fill! Drink up! Receive God's love, forgiveness, and grace.”

But as you would reach for a handful of bread,
wouldn't the Holy Spirit of love prompt us to ask,
“What about everybody else?”

Isn't that why Christ died?

Didn't he come to rescue us from selfishness and isolation
and open us up to care for others in the same way?

And all he asks is that we remember him – and remember each other.

And so, a single piece of bread would be enough
and a taste of the grape would be enough,
because it's about making sure everybody together
has something, too.

I believe the key verse to this text is John 6:63

and I interpret Jesus' words in this way:

'It is the Holy Spirit, the Great Spirit that gives life;

The flesh is not what matters.

What I am saying to you is what spirit and life really are about...'

So, when we share the elements of the Eucharist – literally, the Good Gifts,
we are together for a time in Beloved Community, communing in unity
with God and one another through Christ.

Amen.

Our lesson from Exodus 16:1-5 describes the tension between the people and Moses over not having any food to eat in the desert and how God provided for them.

1 On the fifteenth day of the second month
after the Israelites had escaped from Egypt, they left Elim
and started through the western edge of the Sinai Desert
in the direction of Mount Sinai.

2 There in the desert they started complaining to Moses and Aaron,

3 " We wish the LORD had killed us in Egypt.

When we lived there, we could at least sit down
and eat all the bread and meat we wanted.

But you have brought us out here into this desert,
where we are going to starve."

4 The LORD said to Moses,

" I will send bread down from heaven like rain.

Each day the people can go out
and gather only enough for that day.

That's how I will see if they obey me.

5 But on the sixth day of each week
they must gather and cook twice as much."

John 6:22-35a, 60-67

[22] On the next day the people who remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone.

[23] However, boats from Tiber'i-as came near the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks.

[24] So when the people saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Caper'na-um, seeking Jesus.

[25] When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

[26] Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

[27] Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal."

[28] Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?"

[29] Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

[30] So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform?"

[31] Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, `He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

[32] Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.

[33] For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world."

[34] They said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always."

[35] Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life..."

[But then Jesus explained that the "bread" was his flesh and the "cup" he offered them was of his blood.]

[60] Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

[61] But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, "Do you take offense at this?"

[62] Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before?

[63] It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

[64] But there are some of you that do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that would betray him.

[65] And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

[66] After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him.

[67] Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"