

**The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 15
Holy Comforter Episcopal Church
August 16, 2009**

You can do many things these days that used to require significant interaction with people – things that now require no interaction at all.

You can go the bank and use the teller machine and get your cash – you can make a deposit using that same machine.

You can go shopping on line and order just about anything you want – from books to sweaters to a new or used car -- and never have to deal with a person face to face.

Technology has certainly changed and is changing the way we live and the way we interact (or do not) with one another.

Last Sunday's NY Times had an interesting article entitled: Moving to a Digital Future, Where Textbooks Are History.

The article begins with “At Empire High School in Vail, Ariz., students use computers provided by the school to get their lessons, do their homework and hear podcasts of their teachers’ science lectures.” It continues with other examples where students can register for “DIGITAL Sections” in several English, History and Science classes.

To quote the article, “Textbooks have not gone the way of the scroll yet, but many educators say that it will not be long before they are replaced by digital versions – or supplanted altogether by lessons assembled from the wealth of free courseware, educational games, videos and projects on the Web.”

In California, Gov. Schwarzenegger is supporting an initiative that will replace some high school science and math texts with free “open source” digital versions. There is the hope that free ‘flex-books’ will save hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

Of course for many of you this is not surprising news – Wake Forest University was one of the first to issue lap tops to every entering student well over ten years ago. Fred Horton – you may remember our preacher a few weeks ago, tells me that his classes are paperless – i.e. “Papers are done on the students computer – submitted via e-mail – graded by the professor on the computer and the grade e-mailed back.

By the way, the university owns software that is specifically designed to monitor for plagiarism. I find that fascinating – a program that will see your words and automatically check them against millions of pages of previously written materials – in seconds.

It’s no longer the professor sitting behind his/her desk pouring over papers and stopping every now and then to say to him or herself --- “...hmmm that sounds familiar, where have I seen that before?”

So what? Why am I talking about this?

Good question.

It has something to do with virtual and material reality – I am not smart or articulate enough to parse it out – but I am working on it and you are invited to watch. In the process I hope we discover – perhaps learn – something.

Part of what I am looking at is the notion that the information that students are seeking and need to know is the same regardless of the source. The information can be in textbook form or it can be in digital form. One method requires a book – the other - a computer (with appropriate software.) the book is now a virtual book – but the information is the same. What is important is the information.

In the gospel, Jesus says “I am the living bread which 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.

His language then gets very graphic – perhaps more than we would care for: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.”

The writer of John’s gospel is setting up a conflict between Jesus and his listeners – those hearing him will be offended by his words. People were not to eat human flesh nor consume blood – even animal blood. There were religious inhibitions against these things.

By the time of the writing of John’s gospel, the Eucharist was established as the primary sacrament of the fledgling community of believers. So the writer of John is showing how there was reaction and rejection by the neighbors of Jesus and the religious leaders of his time.

It is important to note that the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke along with writings of St. Paul tell us about what Jesus did at the event that many of us know as the “the last supper.”

While Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us what happened, John tells us what it means. He tells us the meaning of Jesus' words about the bread and wine – there is no description of the last supper in John's gospel – you may recall that instead of the meal concerning bread and wine – Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and teaches them the meaning of loving servant hood.

Now back to my earlier discussion – Perhaps the question for today is can the Eucharist be virtual? Can we have a virtual Eucharist?

I mean, why not? Everything else is moving to virtual – can we have a virtual Eucharist?

No!

You can go online and find out about the Eucharist. You can get a virtual textbook about ancient and modern Eucharistic liturgies, but you cannot have a virtual communion.

And in fact, even in the case of education through technology, there is still no substitute for the relationship between the professor and his/her students -- that may be done in a variety of ways, but it is not virtual – it is real.

In fact virtual communion is a contradiction in terms. You must be in a community to have the Eucharist. Why? Because more than anything else, the Eucharist is about a relationship – a relationship with Jesus and you. It is also about a relationship between you and your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Well what about this very explicit language concerning flesh and blood? Two things – 1. It is the language of poetry,

metaphor and symbol. 2. It is the language of mystery – it is beyond our understanding.

Is that a cop out? I think not - it is an admission that the mystery of God and the relationship between God the Father and God's son, Jesus, is greater than our understanding. After all, if we can understand and explain God – then we have become God-like – a dangerous place to be.

All we can do is, as St. Paul suggests: "...see through a glass darkly."

The wonderful writer, recently deceased, Madeleine L'Engle once wrote that "Nothing important is completely explicable." (Synthesis August 16, 2009)

The eminent Anglican scholar Richard Hooker is quoted as saying: "Let it therefore be sufficient for me presenting myself at the Lord's Table, to know what I receive from Him, without search or enquiry of the manner how Christ performeth His promise."

(Ibid)

The early church father, Irenaeus, said it this way, "...Jesus on account of his great love for humankind, became what we are in order to make us what he is himself."

Or put the way I read in a sermon attempting to explain the mystery of what happens as Christians partake of the bread and wine – the body and blood of Jesus Christ: "Remember, you are what you eat."

It is in that spirit that I now invite you to join with me in praying an ancient prayer that has been found in one form or

another in Anglican liturgies over the centuries. It is on page 337 of the Book of Common Prayer.

“We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.” *Amen.*