

**The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 16
Holy Comforter Episcopal Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
August 23, 2009**

I once served a little mission church in a small town about twenty miles outside of Winston-Salem. It was one of those small churches that could only afford supply or very limited part-time clergy. I was the vicar – a title used in our diocese to designate the priest in charge of a mission congregation.

In any event, on one Sunday morning just prior to the service, a lady who could rightly be called a ‘matriarch’ of the church, came up to me with her five-year-old granddaughter in hand – this child had been coming up to the altar every Sunday, and her grandmother would always instruct her to cross her arms over her chest for a blessing. It was easy to see that this did not sit well with the child.

So on this particular Sunday, the grandmother brings the child into my office and says, “Will you please tell (Joanna) why she cannot take communion.”

I replied, “You tell her why she can’t. I have no reason -- she is baptized – that is the only requirement I know of.”

She replied “I don’t want her to receive it until she can understand it.”

To which I replied, “Then I expect that none of us should receive.”

I do not recount that story to imply that I won in an encounter with a very powerful and pushy matriarch – but to illustrate my theology of the Eucharist.

It is not something we do because we understand it. It is not even something we do because we want to or we feel like it. It is a mystery in which we participate because we are baptized into Christ – we have been marked as ‘Christ’s own forever.’

The Eucharist has been the focus of our gospel for some weeks now.

In fact, we have had so many gospels about the bread of life, I feel like the driver of a bread truck. I am reminded of the old Brother Dave Gardner saying – “Man cannot live on bread alone; he must have peanut butter.”

Brother Dave was a comedian of some fame back in the fifties and early sixties – he once played in a night club in which I was the drummer. He was a funny, sacrilegious, somewhat racist, and complex man.

Actually, I have been thinking there must be a reason that we are stuck in the sixth chapter of John’s gospel.

After all, this started on July 26th and we are still here -- Every Sunday more about bread -- True bread – bread that came down from heaven – this bread is my body --- I am the bread – and on and on.

Five weeks on the ‘Bread of Life’ -- Maybe it is important – ya think?

Anyway we are talking about bread.

In every culture, bread is seen as a basic source of nutrition.

The word ‘bread’ even takes on various meanings implying the essence of living or making a living. “How are you making your bread?” can mean how you are making a living.

In slang “I am out of bread...” means that you are broke.

So it is that when we talk of bread, we are dealing something symbolic, but also very real ----- the staff of life.

As Episcopalians, we believe in the “real presence of Christ” in the Eucharist. That is to say that we believe that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine. We do not believe that it is a figure of speech – but rather that Christ is truly present.

This is very different from the understanding of the Eucharist as a memorial service: the more traditional Protestant belief. At Temple Baptist Church we had communion once a quarter, whether we needed it or not. The service was about what happened then and there – not about the here and now.

This, ‘real presence’ is also different from a belief in “transubstantiation” which is a belief in the conversion of the whole substance of the bread and wine into the whole substance of the body and blood of Christ – though the appearance is unchanged.

Concerning ‘real presence’ one Episcopalian was heard to say: “It is easier to believe that Christ is truly present in the bread, than it is to believe that the wafers given in communion are truly bread.”

As you can see the issue of “I am the bread of life...” is one that takes on extremely important ramifications for faith and how we go about practicing it.

Of course there is a great difference between understanding the theories, practices and beliefs about the Eucharist and understanding the Eucharist. That is to say - it is a mystery why Christ is truly present in the bread and wine.

Some of us can claim that we have felt the presence of Christ as we have had a moving worship experience. Some can say, I just believe it – I don’t claim to understand it.

Either one is fine.

I will say that regardless of how you feel, Christ is present in the Eucharist. That is really good news, it means that our feelings which are so subject to change and at best are subjective, are not proof of Christ’s presence – if that were the case then if we didn’t feel a particular way, Christ would not be there for us – that would mean he was a product of our emotions – another kind of slippery slope – creating God’s presence with our emotions.

You may remember that in today’s gospel some who had been following Jesus left him after his discourse on the bread and wine as body and blood. Some have said that perhaps they began to realize that even though Christ gives himself to us in the Eucharist, the gift has its demands.

As the book “Living Liturgy” (page 200) says, “...it is the Eucharist that draws together our relationship with Jesus as well as with one another in lives of self-giving. And this is what makes choosing the Gift so difficult: the demand of the Gift is that we be like the Giver and give ourselves over for the good

of others. On our own, we could not even make such a demanding and all-encompassing choice. But Jesus also reminds us that we are not alone; the Spirit is given us as well and enables us to make the choice to which Jesus calls us.”

At the heart of the Eucharist is Jesus’ sacrifice. At the heart of God’s love is sacrifice. Remember that Bible verse we all were taught as children: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that all who believed in him would not perish but have everlasting life.” Sacrifice.

We partake in this Holy Meal because we pray that it will enable and empower us to live lives of loving sacrifice. After all, partaking of body of Christ is supposed to make a difference in who we are and how we live.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ you stretched out your loving arms on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us in your spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you for the honor of your name.

Amen