

Sermon Proper 15B

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The Rev. Sylvia Miller-Mutia, Associate Rector

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM

Readings at https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp15_RCL.html

Back in Lent of 2020, just a few weeks into the pandemic, before we had even figured out how to do Zoom, when Deacon David, Fr. Christopher and I were celebrating the Eucharist around a little table in Fr. Christopher's office and streaming the service to Facebook from my cell phone jerry-rigged to a coat rack, when the constraints of the new pandemic had forced us to unexpectedly recall and embrace the practice of "ocular communion", a practice widespread in the medieval catholic church in which the faithful availed themselves of the grace of the sacrament by seeing, rather than tasting, the body and blood of Christ at the Eucharist,

In those earliest pandemic days, around the little round table in Fr. Christopher's office, we adopted these words as our invitation to communion:

"Behold the Body of Christ, given for the Life of the World.

Become the Body of Christ, given for the Life of the World."

Now, almost 18 months later, many (though not all) of us have been able to return to gathering together in person to celebrate the weekly eucharist, where we can Taste AND See the goodness of the Lord in the Holy Eucharist, but these words of invitation have persisted in our liturgy:

"Behold the Body of Christ, given for the Life of the World.

The priest lifts the chalice and host high overhead, for all to see...

Become the Body of Christ, given for the Life of the World."

The priest slowly lowers the elements back down to the altar

Standing at the altar I see

The chalice and host descend from above,

they come to my eye level, filling my view,

then continue their descent until they come to rest on the altar.

As I witness the descent of the host, it is like a Eucharistic veil falling away,

or perhaps the veil isn't falling, but rather growing transparent

to reveal all of you--the body of Christ, given for the life of the world.

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus say, once again, these familiar words:

"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 bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

In the Episcopal Church, and the Anglican tradition more broadly, there is no universal, binding theological consensus when it comes to our Theology of the Eucharist. We don't pretend, or think we need to understand, what exactly is going on with the Bread and Wine in the midst of the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. --you can in good conscience come to the altar with hands outstretched whether you believe in transubstantiation, or consubstantiation, or to memorialize, or pneumatic presence...For that matter, you can in good conscience come to the altar with hands outstretched when you aren't sure *what* you believe in, except for some gnawing hunger within you that longs to be satisfied.

Jesus says, **"The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."**

I'll be the first to admit it's a pretty outrageous claim. John's Gospel tells us that even some of the folks who had followed Jesus up to this point in the story felt like he was going too far with this one--which is saying something for the Rabbi who had gained a reputation for regularly going too far--and some drifted away.

"The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

If you don't feel at least a *little* scandalized and perplexed; at least vaguely frightened; at least a little cautious or curious by these words of Jesus ...well you probably should.

The scandalous bread that Jesus offers is not unlike the scandalous meal described in today's first lesson from the Book of Proverbs. The author describes this scene:

Wisdom sets a table,
then sends her servant girl to call out from the highest place in the town:
"You that are simple, turn in here!"
To those without sense she says,
"Come, eat of my bread."

Holy Wisdom basically sends her servant to perch on the rooftop,
shouting out loudly and indiscriminately to all the passersby
"Hey stupid!! This way! You're hungry aren't you? Dinner is served!"

Sounds a little sketchy, right? You'd have to be pretty desperate---you'd have to be REALLY hungry---to heed the call of Wisdom's servant. Or, if we want to be honest, to heed the call of Jesus.

"The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Just how hungry are you? Are you hungry enough? Turns out I AM. When I witness the pain, and suffering, and death and diminishment of life in the world around me, I AM THAT

desperate. I AM THAT hungry. I want LIFE that much. I want full, abundant, vital, loving life for myself. I want full, abundant, vital, loving life for our world so much that I'm willing to risk it. I'm willing to bite.

But be forewarned: once you bite, there's no going back. In eating the bread that Jesus offers, I'm assenting to the reality Jesus offers, as well.

In eating the bread that Jesus offers, I assent to internalizing the flesh and blood--the true self--the very life of Jesus. Fully God. Fully Human. The whole paradoxical mystery life. It's getting inside of me. And once it's inside, I can't get it out. Once I've tasted the bread that Jesus offers, I can never again pretend that I am separate from God. Once I've tasted the bread that Jesus offers, I can never again pretend that I am separate from other people, from my friends, from my enemies, from the rest of humanity, from the rest of creation.

In Jesus the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and the fullness of humanity, too. Once I've tasted the bread that Jesus offers, I can never escape the truth that I am inextricably and eternally bound to God and to every particle of God's creation.

What's more, once I've tasted the bread that Jesus offers, I am forced to realize that this reality of mutual indwelling and interconnection is not merely a spiritual or philosophical or metaphorical reality--it is an actual, physical reality, as well. When I taste the bread that Jesus offers, I accept the reality that my life cannot exist outside of the life of God or the life of the world. When I eat the bread that Jesus offers, I say "Amen" to the reality that the life that flows through my veins, that energizes my action, that builds up my cells, is not mine alone. My life is forever mixed up with the life of God and the life of the World. My life is forever a life in God and a life in the World. **And my life is forever a life FOR God. And a life FOR the World.**

You've all heard the old saying, "You are what you eat." So, think for a moment about what those words mean.

Jesus says: **"The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."**

When we receive the bread that Jesus offers, we say "yes" to receiving the Body of Christ, we say "yes" to receiving life.

But when we receive the bread that Jesus offers, we also say "yes" to **becoming** the Body of Christ, we say "yes" to giving *ourselves--our bodies, our resources, our lives, our flesh--* for the life of the world.

Not just for our family. Not just for our friends. Not just for good people or the places we like. The Greek word for "the world" is "*kosmos*": the whole, broken, sinful, distorted, destructive, imperfect, expanding, infinite, beloved universe, every last corner of God's creation. We give our whole lives for the life of the whole world. And in giving this gift we

discover a mystery: that life, thus given, is never diminished. Life, thus given, only expands and grows.

Jesus says: **“The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”**

Jesus doesn't say,

“The bread that I will give for the life of my friends is my flesh.”

Jesus doesn't say,

“The bread that I will give for the life of the church is my flesh.”

Jesus doesn't say,

“The bread that I will give for the life of the worthy is my flesh.”

Jesus doesn't say,

“The bread that I will give for the life of believers is my flesh.”

Jesus doesn't say,

“The bread that I will give for the life of my chosen ones is my flesh.”

Jesus says

“The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

“The bread that I will give for the life of the kosmos is my flesh.”

Hear Wisdom when she says:

**“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.”**

Hear Jesus when he says:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

Hear Jesus saying to all of *us*:

“The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

“The bread that I will give for the life of the kosmos is *you*.”

