**12 Pentecost**

**August 9, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

I don’t know if you have noticed, but for the past three weeks we have been reading from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. In the earlier part of the summer ... late May, June, and most of July ... our Gospel readings were from Mark. Then, just as Mark is getting ready to tell the story of the feeding of the 5,000 we switched to John’s gospel to hear him tell the story and we have been reading in sequence ever since. Not only are they in sequence … the readings have acted almost like a tag team in professional wrestling. For example, the reading last week ended with verse 35:

*"I am the bread of life.”*

Then the reading this week began with verse 35:

*"I am the bread of life.”*

And then ended with verse 51:

*“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever;”*

Next week’s reading from John’s gospel begins with verse 51 … the same verse that ended this week’s reading:

*“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever;”*

And the same thing happens for two more weeks. For five weeks in a row the final words of the reading from John’s gospel one week become the opening words the next. And for four of those weeks we listened to the words of Jesus including: “I am the bread of life.” “Whoever eats this bread will live forever.”

In John's gospel Jesus describes himself seven times with "I am" sayings. These “I am” sayings are intentional literary allusions to Yahweh, who when asked by Moses at the burning bush what is the name of the God who is sending him forth, Yahweh responds, "I am."

Jesus compares himself to light in darkness … “I am the light of the world”; a gate to a safe pasture … “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved.” He identifies himself with a good shepherd who sacrifices himself for his sheep … “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” Jesus says he is the resurrection and the life who conquers death … “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live.” And Jesus also uses the image of the true vine who fulfills Israel's destiny “I am the true vine.”

And just as he compared himself to "living water" that quenches our thirst, Jesus also identified himself as the one who satisfies our deepest hungers: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." The ancient Hebrews ate miraculous manna from heaven in the desert, says Jesus, but they nevertheless died. Jesus, in contrast, says that "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If a man eats of this bread, he will live forever.”

Each week, as we worship together and begin the prayer of consecration, I invite all those who are worshipping with us to fully participate in the sacrament.

*“This is a banquet that is set for all of God’s people, and I sincerely invite and encourage all who are worshipping with us to feel welcome to receive the Bread and Wine at our communion rail.”*

So what is this all about? Why do all these readings overlap … and all of them focused on Jesus saying he is the “bread of life?” And what does he mean when he says “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them?” Finally, what do these readings have to do with all the “hocus pocus” that happens at the altar during our Eucharistic prayer? Even his disciples said, “This is a hard saying.”

Twenty-five years ago, when I became rector of St. Mark’s in Toledo, Ohio, 80 year-old Frank Pitt served on the Vestry and the Endowment Fund committee. He was what we once called a true “churchman.” He and his wife Gladys were at church every Sunday where I gave them communion each week. As Frank’s health declined I would visit him at home and take him communion on a regular basis. At his funeral we included communion as part of the service. However, in the weeks that followed I noticed that Frank’s widow, Gladys, just sat in the pew when others came to the communion rail. I thought that maybe it was part of her grief process and that taking communion might remind her too much of her late husband, or maybe the funeral, so I went to visit Gladys.

It turned out that none of my assumptions were true. Gladys had grown up in the early part of the 20th century and her family was devoutly Roman Catholics. She had learned in Catechism that the communion wafer was Christ’s flesh, and that the wine in the chalice was Christ’s blood. She understood this literally, and she told me that even as a young girl she found it to be repulsive. She could force herself to eat the wafer … it looked like a cracker even if it stuck to the roof of her mouth. And, at that time in the life of the Roman Catholic Church, only the priests drank out of the chalice. So she could get by. But when she married Frank she all at once had to drink from the chalice, and she told me that every time she did she could only think of the wine as being literally blood. Gladys said that instead of being comforted and strengthened by receiving communion she left the rail feeling queasy and unsettled. She had never told Frank, but now that he was no longer there she decided to follow her heart and not come to the communion rail.

So, is this bread literally the “flesh” of Jesus? Is this wine literally the “blood” of Christ? According to the way some people read John’s gospel, at least what we read this morning, it is. But, how? It looks and tastes like bread and wine … even if the wine is Tawny Port.

First of all, we have to ask whether we are to read this portion of John’s gospel literally. Is Jesus saying … at least in John’s gospel … that we must literally eat his flesh and drink his blood? Or is what Jesus is saying symbolic and metaphorical? I think you might guess that I believe these images are symbolic and metaphorical, just as other images in John’s gospel are to be understood symbolically and metaphorically. Remember, Jesus said that he was the “light of the world;” the “gate;” the “true vine;” the “living water.” Now we know that Jesus was not literally a “light” or a “gate” or a “vine” or “water.” Those are metaphors, and if the author of John’s gospel could employ metaphors in those cases then why not in the case of flesh and blood?

Yet, that still leaves us with the question of what he might mean. How are we to understand what happens at this altar? Is it just bread and wine? Is it more than that, and if so what?

My former parishioner, Gladys Pitt, was taught the Roman Catholic understanding of transubstantiation. I know this gets a little technical, but this is the belief that in our prayers at the altar the bread and wine actually become the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ … they just look like bread and wine. It is kind of like magic. As a matter of fact, the magicians incantation “hocus pocus” is a perversion of the Latin for “this is my body” said during the consecration.

In 1801, when the Episcopal Church in this country made a statement about its doctrine in what is called the Articles of Religion … the Articles of Religion can be found in a section of the Book of Common Prayer called Historical Documents ... the Articles of Religion are found on pages 867 through 876 and the Articles of Religion addressed the issue of transubstantiation in Section 27 this way:

***Section XXVII: Of the Lord’s Supper***

*Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but it is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthrowth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions.*

Now I know all this may sound more like a classroom lecture than a sermon, but I will finish by sharing my belief about what happens at the altar. First of all our Holy Eucharist is a “sacrament” as defined by our Catechism: “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” “The outward and visible sign” are the words and actions at the altar, and your participation in receiving the Bread and Wine is the expression of the “inward and spiritual grace.”

Secondly, our Eucharist is a holy mystery … by its very nature it is beyond description in human terms. How does it work? I don’t really know, but I know that it does. I have known a depth of spirituality as I say these prayers in the Eucharist that I have known in no other way. And I have known a closeness to the divine spirit of God in the Eucharist that I have not found elsewhere. Others have told me the same thing. It is a holy mystery that is beyond my ability to fully describe.

Thirdly, like I would tell youngsters … it is a holy food for holy people. This holy meal is shared by people around the world … all kinds of people ... people of all colors and nationalities ... people who look like us and people who do not ... people we like and people we don’t like. In God’s eyes they are all welcome at God’s table for spiritual nourishment. And remember, this meal has been shared by people all the way back to Jesus for 2,000 years. We are connected to them as the spiritual ancestors that have kept this faith alive.

We come to this table because it is a sharing … in God’s name and in the name of Jesus … the embodiment of God ... what the author of John’s gospel calls “flesh” and “blood” ... the embodiment of God can come alive in us as it was alive in Jesus. When we eat his “flesh” and drink his “blood” we are participating in the fullness of the same holy life that Jesus knew … it did not end with his death, but came alive in his resurrection … and it comes alive in us. We are God’s beloved and blessed children … regardless of our faults and missteps … and in this holy meal we celebrate our redemption by God’s grace.

This is holy food for holy people. It is a banquet that is set for all of God’s people. It is a sharing of a holy meal with each other, with everyone in every place who has ever partaken of this meal, and with the holiness of Jesus that is also alive in each one of us.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.”

Amen.