

**10 Pentecost
August 1, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

I struggled with this sermon. I spent several hours going one way and feeling like I was headed down a dead end. It all seemed so heady and intellectual as if I could get at the spirit of what I wanted to say by setting an argument in front of you.

Here is the problem. Last week we started five weeks of reading from the sixth chapter of John's gospel. Last Sunday was the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Today we hear the words "*I am the bread of life.*" Next week we will hear "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven.*" The following week the text includes, "*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*" And, in the final week of this series we will hear, "*He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'*"

The problem is I am like the disciples ... "*This teaching is difficult.*"

It is hard to get away from reading these lessons into our liturgy of Holy Eucharist. That is the trap I kept falling into. It brings up theological issues like "transubstantiation," and the Episcopal Church's "Thirty-Nine Articles." But this is supposed to be a sermon, not a lecture.

Thirty years ago I was Rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Toledo, Ohio. Parishioners Frank and Gladys Pitt were in church every Sunday, coming to the communion rail together. When Frank died Gladys still came to church, but she did not come up to receive communion. I assumed it was because Holy Communion would be too emotional an experience to receive by herself.

I was wrong. Gladys had grown up in the early part of the 20th century and she told me that 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 ... an echo of the words in the sixth chapter of John's gospel. At her young age she understood this literally, and she told me that even as a youth she found it to be repulsive. Gladys said 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 and became an Episcopalian, 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.

Sometimes words are not adequate to express a reality that we all know to be authentic. I find that to be especially true when it comes to experiences of the sacred and holy. In church we use the word "God" to indicate the holiest of holies. But what does that really mean? No matter what we say about God, there is still more to be said. Whatever God is, the totality of God is beyond our comprehension, much less our expression.

So we do our best. We point to God. We speak of experiences of the holy ... the sacred. We speak in code ... we use metaphors ... we talk about mystery. We know that one's own experience of God may not be the same experience that another has of God, yet we try to find a common denominator. It is a mystery ... God is a mystery ... yet many people have experiences of what they call God, so we gather to share our experiences even if we cannot fully describe them ... we seem to be limited by our language.

Orthodox Jews do not write or say the word "God." When they have to write it they spell "G-dash-D." They use a nickname in speaking about God ... Hashem. When Moses encountered God at the burning bush he asked God's name. God answered *"I am who I am. Tell them that 'I am' sent you."* That "I am" in Hebrew is Yahweh, or Jehovah.

In John's gospel Jesus describes himself seven times with *"I am"* sayings. These *"I am"* sayings are intentional literary allusions to the story of Moses at the burning bush. Jesus compares himself to light in darkness ... *"I am the light of the world."* Jesus uses the metaphor of 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."*

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."*

The problem is that I know I am hungry, but I'm like the disciples, *"This teaching is difficult."* As I mentioned, I get distracted by the practices of our Church's liturgy around Holy Communion, and I don't pay attention to the fact that Jesus isn't speaking literally ... he is offering a mystical route to a transformative experience where one lives in God, rather than just acknowledge God's existence in one's life.

You see, I am not just hungry for bread ... or even fish ... as the people were fed in the story we heard last week. My real hunger ... my deeper hunger ... is for security and belonging ... meaning and purpose. I have a longing for connection, communion, intimacy, and love ... a desire to know and be known. I hunger for justice, and healing, and a significant life. I would love to feast on delight, and joy, and a creative engagement with the world in all of its complexity, and mystery, and beauty. And way down deep in my belly ... in my gut ... I have an ongoing hunger for wholeness, redemption, and courage ... a real craving for the healing of old wounds. I'm sure I hunger for more as well ... hungers that are hidden and yet to be discovered.

I also know those hungers cannot be filled with mere food for my stomach ... it is a hunger that is beneath ... and beyond ... my physical appetite, and I believe we all have that hunger in one degree or another.

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.”

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

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 (when it is available) 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 those 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 ... this 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. Our deepest hungers are fed at this table. 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. Our deepest hungers are fed at this table. 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.