

Eleventh Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL)
John 6.51-58
August 15-16, 2009
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan

My high school ring has a picture of a pelican engraved on it, even though the pelican was not our school mascot. It is a symbol beloved by the Sisters of Charity who founded many schools, including the Academy of St. Elizabeth in Convent Station, which I attended. We hear the word *charity* and may think of non-profits (as in, “I give to charity”) or acts of kindness to the poor (as in, “He’s big into charity”). At its heart, though, *charity* simply means love.

The pelican is a symbol of Christian charity because of an incorrect but interesting belief about the bird. Long ago people who saw the pelican’s red-tipped bill against its snowy white breast thought she was tearing her flesh to feed her young with the blood she drew from herself. The pelican thus became a symbol of Christ, who poured out His lifeblood for us on the cross, and who gives us His blood to drink and nourish us in Holy Communion.

The concept of a man giving his flesh as food and his blood as drink was a tough one two thousand years ago, and still is. Two verses beyond the Gospel I just read, St. John writes,

Many among his disciples heard this and said, “This is tough teaching, too tough to swallow.” (John 6.60, *The Message*)

But we do. We believe Jesus’ Body and Blood are “really present” in, with and under the blessed bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. We believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. That is why this meal is so precious to us.

Celebrating together around this altar, sharing this Meal with one other, is not an added extra to our week. It’s not frosting on the cake. It’s the meat and potatoes, so to speak, of our life together as Christians and of our personal relationship with Christ. Jesus doesn’t say of Holy Communion with Him, “It’s a good idea and a nice opportunity.” He says,

“Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” (John 6.53)

Why?? Jesus explains,

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood **abide** in me, and I in them.” (John 6.56)

St. John **loves** that word *abide*! It means to remain, to dwell in, as in “Abide in my love.” St. John tells us that the night before He died, Jesus said to His friends,

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15.4-5)

By reaching out to receive the gifts of the altar, the Body and Blood of Christ, we attach ourselves to the life-giving Vine. We remain connected to the source of our spiritual oxygen. We sink our roots into the water table of God’s love, so deep that it will never run dry. In the words of Psalm 1, we become:

... like trees
 planted by streams of water,
 which yield their fruit in due season,
 and their leaves do not wither....
 Psalm 1.3

When we prepare our third graders to receive Holy Communion we teach them to hold their hands like a throne, because Jesus, the King of our hearts, is coming to them in the Bread. We share our awe that the King of the universe comes to us in this sacrament, holy Guest whom we gladly receive, Guest who is also Host of the feast **and** the Feast itself. Quoting our sister in Christ, Edith Derres, now part of the church triumphant in heaven, we teach our children that we do not “take” Holy Communion; we “**receive**” it gratefully, joyfully, humbly from the hand of the loving, nurturing God who offers it to us.

The gift of Jesus' Body within the Bread in our hands, the gift of Jesus' Blood within the wine on our lips contains the greater gift of Jesus' entire life and death. Remember those words near the beginning of St. John's Gospel?

And the Word became flesh and lived among us.... (John 1.14a)

And **why** did He take on flesh, why did He choose to dwell, to abide with us?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3.16)

Jesus connects the dots further by telling the people,

"...the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6.51c)

St. Paul said,

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11.26)

When our old selves were drowned in the waters of baptism, we shared in Christ's death. When we eat and drink the bounty of the Lord's Supper, we proclaim His death **and** we are sacramentally joined to the suffering of the Body of Christ in the world. Our communion with Jesus becomes our communion with each other and with brothers and sisters far beyond the reach of this sanctuary in terms of both space **and** time.

I love Holy Communion. I think you do, too, otherwise you wouldn't be here. It's exciting to be in a sanctuary filled with worshipers and gorgeous music on our high holy days. But it's **God's** presence when two or more of us are gathered that draws me back here time and again. I appreciate the beauty of the gold chalice on which the Good Shepherd is embedded in cloisonné. But whether the container is gold or glass, it's the contents, Christ's Blood, which is precious to me. I love the taste of the delicious honey-flavored bread we enjoy on Saturday evenings. But whether there is home-baked bread or uniformly stamped wafers on the paten, what matters to me is the true gift of the real presence of Christ: Jesus, here and now.

May the Holy Spirit open doors of opportunity, present each one of us with clear chances, with courage, to tell others, “The Table is set; you are invited!” If you have a loved one, a friend, co-worker, neighbor, teammate, who hasn’t drawn near lately, may the Holy Spirit inspire you, give you words to invite that person to the Feast. In sharing this Holy Communion, Christ comes to abide, to dwell in us; but more importantly, we come to abide, to dwell in God. It’s not just that God moves in our space. We begin to move in God’s space. That is life for us, eternal life, here and now.

In closing, remember the pelican, symbol of our Christ on the cross, and meditate on this Communion prayer from the book of *Celtic Daily Prayer**:

When the Saviour of the world
was stretched out on the tree of death,
the elements erupted
and earth gave up its dead.
His blood, spilled on the earth,
transformed earth and heaven.
May His body and blood
change us and transform us.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

**Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2002, p. 84.