

Thirteenth Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL): "Bread & Wine: The Loveliest Meal of All"
John 6:51-58
August 18-19, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I love bread. When I go to an Italian restaurant I often think, "I'd really be happy just with this lovely crusty loaf, some nice butter (I don't like dipping my bread into olive oil) and a glass of wine." I always order an entrée and often dessert, too, but it seems that bread and wine anchor the meal for me. Maybe this is a small part of why I love Eucharist: a **whole Meal** made up of bread and wine.

We've had a whole series of weekends when the Gospel has been about **bread**: first the feeding of the 5,000 and then Jesus preaching about the living bread that comes down from heaven. I've been preaching on the epistles from Ephesians instead, because they are magnificent, but also because I feel like I'm **always** preaching about Eucharist. Maybe not all that effectively, though – I've gotta wonder if only I communicated the holy wonder, the mystical beauty of Eucharist better, then there'd be more people flocking to receive the Gift – even in the summer.

I realize I'm "preaching to the choir," because you **are** here today. Why? What draws you so faithfully, week in and week out? What hunger is fed?

The Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John we hear from once again today, has no institution of the Lord's Supper at the Last Supper. Jesus doesn't take bread and say, "This is my body," He doesn't take wine and say, "This is my blood." (The "sacrament" in the Fourth Gospel is the footwashing.) Instead, Jesus has this beautiful discourse after the

feeding of the 5,000, which is the basis for much of our Eucharistic theology. (By the way, Eucharist, Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, Sacrament of the Altar, are all the same One.)

This Gospel of John includes the great "I am" sayings:

"I am the bread of life... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." (John 6:35, 51)

Each of the "I am's" is linked to a "You are." For instance:

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

In other words, "**I am** the light of the world. **You are** on a well-lit path and will not stumble, as long as you follow me."

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me..." (John 10:14)

In other words, "**I am** the good shepherd. **You are** a precious lamb in my flock."

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." (John 11:25)

In other words, "**I am** the resurrection and the life. **You are** destined for eternal, not just earthly, life."

"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

In other words, "**I am** the way, the truth and the life. You are on the right road, programmed to reach Home, as long as I am your GPS."

"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 15:5)

In other words, "**I am** the vine, you are the branches. **You are** fruitful as long as you stay in close communion with me."

There is no better way to be in communion with the Lord than to partake of His Body & Blood in Holy Communion. It used to be thought in some parts of the Church that

Holy Communion is so special we shouldn't enjoy it too frequently. But then the realization dawned that we sinners are **always** in need of the forgiveness that we receive in the Sacrament. We mere mortals are **always** in need of heaven's joy to counteract earth's sorrow. We lambs are always in need of close communion with our Shepherd. We branches are **always** in need of living connection with the Vine who feeds us and apart from whom we wither and die. We pilgrims are **always** in need of spiritual nourishment to strengthen and inspire us along the Way.

In the ancient days of animal sacrifice in the Jewish temple and other places, an animal was slaughtered and offered up in prayer. But only a portion of it was actually immolated, burnt on the altar. The rest was divided up between the priest and the worshiper. This allotment was part of the priest's income, and for the worshiper it became a feast for himself and his family. Whatever had been offered to the deity was believed to be filled with the deity. To eat the sacrifice was to become full of God. We become full of our Lord, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, when we receive the Body & Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. (The word *enthusiastic* means filled-with-God!)

Receiving the Holy Supper doesn't only bring us into communion with our Lord. It brings us into communion with our loved ones who have gone ahead. We enjoy a nibble and sip of glory; they sit down at the heavenly banquet. That's the beauty of celebrating Holy Communion at a funeral, as we did this past Monday and this Saturday. We receive comfort in Word & Sacrament; we meet our deceased loved ones again at the Lord's Table, which extends from earth to heaven. Many of you have heard me mention this before, but in the final scene of the movie *Places in the Heart*, we see the pews in a little clapboard

church **filled** with worshipers as they pass the blessed Bread and Wine to one another. We see the characters who are still alive and well, interspersed with those who died over the course of the story. They all share the Lord's Supper together.

We believe that in the Sanctus, the Holy, Holy, we sing with the whole heavenly chorus of saints and angels. We believe that in Holy Communion we share the Bread of Life, the Cup of Salvation, with the whole company of heaven as well. Our loved ones are present with us, here, invisibly but truly.

There's a prayer by Martin Luther printed at the front of our ELW (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 87). Praying it is a lovely way to prepare to meet the Lord in the Sacrament:

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me, and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you. In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have. I am poor; you are rich and came to be merciful to the poor. I am a sinner; you are upright. With me, there is abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness. Therefore I will remain with you, of whom I can receive, but to whom I may not give. Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham