

*1 Kings 2: 10 - 12, 3: 3 - 14*  
*Psalm 111*  
Year B, 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

*Ephesians 5: 15 - 20*  
*John 6: 51 - 58*  
August 16, 2009

*You are what you eat*

“I just got a big honkin’ piece of Jesus!” The comment came from a member of my youth group. We were at a regional youth event called PYE or the Provincial Youth Event. Hundreds of Episcopal Youth Ministers and high school students from throughout the Southeast were gathered together for a weekend long series of events. One of those events was a large community Eucharist. The bread used were enormous loaves which the clergy tore into large pieces. As we returned to our seats, one of the youth, still chewing on the share of bread turned to me and said, “Man, I just got a big honkin’ piece of Jesus!”

Almost every Episcopalian I know has a story that is not too far off from this one. We have tales of all sorts of moments where we are gathered around the table- stories of something that happened to us, to a friend, or even a moment we witnessed. Many in this congregation have shared those joyful memories from the church on the hill, recalling funny moments, or simply remembering instances of making eye contact across the altar rail as someone received communion. All of these tales are told in the same smiling, fond tone we reserve for moments with families and close friends, similar to moments shared at holidays, birthday parties, and anniversaries. They are special, different, golden moments. They are completely sacred ones. Something about breaking bread and sharing a meal together around any table becomes a moment of sacred joy and holy reflection.

When push comes to shove, most Episcopalians do not know what we believe or teach about the Eucharist. The prayers we recite and hear each

Sunday open the door part way, but we seldom speak or engage the theology of what is happening at our mystical supper. Today's gospel lesson opens one door that many understand. Each week we follow the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary. This list of scripture was compiled by a group of liturgical denominations that attempted to reconcile our minor differences in what we read each week. The idea is that all liturgical Christians would at least read and preach and teach on the same verses. So Lutheran, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and even our Roman Catholic brother and sisters all set out this Revised Common Lectionary. Needless to say, the last four weeks of the sixth chapter of John were vitally important to the Roman Catholic Church. The constant talk of the Bread of Life narrative, which still has one more week, falls into their belief of transubstantiation. The idea is simply that the bread and wine we share at the table becomes the literal body and blood of Christ. So hearing today's verses about eating Jesus' flesh and blood support that idea. Of course, like so many doctrines of the church, we can take things too far. I think I read the story in a Frank McCourt autobiography about teachings around the sacrament. A nun taught him to carefully receive the round wafer on your tongue and let it dissolve on the roof of your mouth. He received strict instructions to never chew the bread. After all, it was Christ's flesh and we have already caused him enough pain without adding to it with our gnawing on his body!

One of the many marking of the Protestant Reformation was to reject this doctrine. I think the basic objection was best summed up by one of our own youth. At our Children's service, I regularly ask the youth to come forward and gather around the table to see what is happening. As I picked up the cup and said, "Drink this all of you; This is my Blood." This one girl interrupted me and said with a bit of concern, "But not really blood just wine!"

The Protestant theology became known as consubstantiation. The idea is that Christ was perhaps present in the bread and wine but that nothing physical changed during the prayers. In many cases, the Protestant movement began to proclaim that it was nothing more than a memory or a remembrance of something that happened long ago, stripping a great deal of the power from the sacrament.

I would argue that the reality is much, much messier. We have seven verses this morning. In those seven verses, Jesus tells us seven times, “Eat my flesh, drink my blood. Eat my flesh, drink my blood. Eat my flesh, drink my blood. Eat my flesh, drink my blood. Eat my flesh, drink my blood. Eat my flesh, drink my blood. Eat my flesh, drink my blood.” Jesus is clearly trying to get through our thick skulls. First of all, we need to recall that the Gospel of John has no words of institution moment. Said differently, we never see Jesus at the last supper with his disciples saying the polite version, “Take eat, this is my body.” Instead, we have these insistent seven verses. These scant few verses have caused some trouble as well. For the first several hundred years of Christian history, we were considered cannibals by Jews and Romans alike. We were an outcast because of the invitation to eat our Lord’s body and drink his blood. In an era where cults like that existed, Christians were viewed as lunatics. Jesus is trying to get our attention and make sure we understand it. “Eat my flesh, drink my blood.” For many scholars, this phrasing is meant to invite us into a human moment with Jesus. The way to know him is through flesh and blood. We still use the turn of phrase today to speak of those who are close to us or relatives, “Here is my flesh and blood.” Of course, the moment becomes even more messy and human when we discover that the Greek word used is not the classic “to eat.” Instead, at least one scholar notes that the Greek term is closer to a cow chewing her cud. So the line is

something closer to “Munch or chew or gnaw on my body.” Instead of delicately allowing the wafer to dissolve in our mouth, Jesus is asking us to chew, chew, and chew on him.

I think the connotations of this translation are closer to the Episcopal teaching on the Eucharist. Richard Hooker, perhaps the greatest Anglican/Episcopal theologian ever, refused to engage either the Roman Catholic or the Protestant theologies. In classic Episcopal style, he had to be stubborn and chart his own path. Of course, in this case, his ideas are important and more akin to what Jesus is teaching. For Hooker, the Eucharist is not about bread and wine. Those groups who focus on what is happening in the elements on the table are missing the point. Instead, we should be focusing on what happens to the people gathered! Christ’s presence among us in what matters! Those moments where our vocabulary fails, moments we mask with humor and joy, moments we share gathered around a table with friends and family are what are critical and matter more than life itself!

Taken in the context of today’s Gospel, Hooker would say that it is how deeply we drink Christ into us that matter. How much we devour and chew and gnaw on Jesus is important. If we are to be honest with ourselves, we each need to eat an entire loaf or twelve or Christ and we should be drinking gallon upon gallon of his presence. To use the parlance of teenagers, we should be taking “big honkin’ pieces of Jesus” and savoring each gift and bite! We should hear Christ’s insistent, messy proclamation, “Eat, drink, chew, savor, and digest me! Take me into your very being!” What matters is not the bread and wine but the way in which Christ transforms us and transforms this community gathered in his name. Imagine how different we would be if we were serious in hearing Christ’s call. Imagine if we ate of Jesus until we were full. Imagine if we were unafraid to drink Him into the very depths of our being! Imagine if

we truly allowed our flesh and blood to be transformed by his flesh and blood. How very different this whole world would be. It reminds me of an old saying that I think is very true. A saying that is appropriate for this whole teaching and one that I will end with right now:

My friends . . . . you are what you eat!

Amen.