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Pentecost 10

We heard in our Gospel these words from Jesus, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry...” And then the night before he died, Jesus took bread and gave it to his disciples saying, “Take. Eat. This is my body given for you.”

And while Jesus only said, “Eat this,” and never “think about this” or “figure out how this bread can be my body.” And while he definitely never said “fight about this.” Fighting over the bread is what Christians have been doing for centuries.

I can remember being shocked when I learned that Catholics believe in transubstantiation—the idea that the bread and wine are changed in their very substance to the body and blood of Christ. And I also remember being relieved to discover when I became an Episcopalian in my twenties that our theology of the Eucharist only claims that we have the spiritual presence of Christ in the bread and wine.

But now I wonder if we Protestants may have given too much up, that our insistence on making logical sense of how Jesus can be present to us in this holy meal that we share each week, has meant that we have lost the power that comes with mystery.

It is the mystery of the Eucharist that distinguishes Christianity from other religions. Of all the things the world religions have in common, it is only Christianity that says God became flesh, a human body. Incarnation is a pretty scandalous idea. And it’s hard enough to believe that God would take on bodily form in the person of Jesus. But then Jesus expands the idea even more, saying that he is bread from heaven. Bread, that most thing that we need for survival. And Jesus told us that we could eat the bread, that we could eat the body of Christ.

This sounds shocking to our ears today, and it was shocking to those who heard Jesus trying to explain it.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” This was a scandalous proclamation. Those who heard it first turned to each other saying, isn’t this Mary and Joseph’s son? We watched this guy grow up in the neighborhood. Why is he making these crazy claims that he came down from heaven and is the bread of life? And that we can eat his flesh. The people argue and wonder over what Jesus said, and some of his disciples even turn back, refusing to follow him any longer.

It seems like such a crazy idea. And yet, maybe it’s exactly what we need. Not something that we understand with our head, but with our stomachs. Richard Rohr, Catholic theologian and mystic, reminds us that God didn’t want to enter into our lives in the form of sermons or the Bible only, that God came to feed us more than to teach us. He quotes Gandhi who said, “There are so many hungry people in the world that God could only come into the world in the form of food.”

That’s certainly the truth. Hunger is rampant in our world, both physically and spiritually. We long to be fed. So perhaps it’s time we return to that scandalous idea

that when we come to the table we are feeding on Christ. And that by feeding on Christ, we are being transformed from the inside out.

Richard Rohr believes that we have spent too much of our history arguing over the hows and the ifs and the whos in relation to eucharist instead of teaching people how to be present. If you haven't learned to be present than you will never experience the "real presence" in the bread and wine." he says and then continues, "We made the Eucharist into a magic act to be believed instead of a personal transformation to be experienced. We changed bread more than people, it seems to me. We emphasized the priest as the "transformer" instead of the people as the transformed. The Eucharist is an encounter of the heart, knowing Presence through our available presence. In the Eucharist, we move beyond mere words or rational thought and go to that place where we don't talk about the Mystery; we begin to chew on it." (<https://cac.org/real-presence-2018-07-24/>)

If we believe this...that we come to the table to be fed...to be transformed by that sacrament, then I think we'll have to stop worrying about any rules for who can come to the table. The Eucharist cannot be a tool to distinguish who's worthy and who isn't. If that were the case, the table would be empty. When we start making membership requirements, the Eucharistic meal is no longer about grace and gift—it becomes about what the church is offering instead of what God is offering.

Children tend to be more comfortable with the mystery and much less worried about the rules, than we adults are. Long before I was a priest, my children would find some fabric to hang around their necks to make a stole and then get out the crackers and juice to feed us the Eucharist. Remembering the words from the previous Sunday, they would say, "the body of Christ, the bread of heaven" and press a cracker into my palm. Then "the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation as they lifted one of our fancy glasses up filled with juice. They knew how to chew on and sip the mystery instead of worrying about exactly how Christ came to be in their crackers and juice. And the Eucharist meal that they shared was as sacred as any I've received in the fanciest churches or cathedrals.

We should come to the table more like children. Experiencing the bread and wine with our hearts and stomachs rather than our heads. Our sacraments aren't meant to be understood as much as they are meant to be felt.

And so in our theology of the Eucharist, we don't need to settle for the rational, the tame, or the ordinary. The incarnate, enfleshed God is none of those things. The great mystery of our faith is that Jesus is God incarnate and that Jesus wants to abide in us. Chew on that mystery. Be present until you feel the presence. As Saint Augustine said "Jesus is the bread, awaiting hunger." Amen.