



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 14 – Proper 16 Year B

Gifts of God

[RCL]: 1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84 or 84:1-6; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

If you ever have the chance to visit the Holy Land, you will walk in the footsteps of Jesus and learn about the complicated world in which he lived. You'll visit the Garden of Gethsemane, the Upper Room, and about fifteen sites claiming to be Lazarus' tomb. You'll also likely visit Cana, the place where Jesus is said to have turned containers of water into wine for a wedding feast. At the gift shop, you may even try some "Cana Wedding Wine," but it is not recommended.

While sampling the "Cana Wedding Wine," one tourist asked the theologian guiding their tour, "Is this wine from the time of Jesus?"

To everyone's surprise, the guide answered, "Yes, in fact, this wine is from the time of Jesus Christ because *now* is the time of Jesus Christ. He is not dead, he is risen."

It is one thing to hear these words repeated in the midst of a Eucharistic prayer or during an opening acclamation; it is quite another to hear these words in ordinary conversation, and it is something else entirely to think about our lives through our practice of consuming bread and wine during Holy Communion, but that is precisely what the Eucharist is all about.

In the 1940s, a young black woman invited her boyfriend to join her one Sunday at her Episcopal church, and he was hesitant. He was also black and knew that his girlfriend's congregation was mostly white. This can be an uncomfortable dynamic in the 21st Century—seventy years ago it could have been downright dangerous.

When it came time for Holy Communion, the woman's boyfriend noticed that everyone drank from the same chalice; people who were not allowed to share the same drinking fountains in public were using the same cup to drink the sacramental wine. Nervously, he followed her to the rail and watched as she took bread. The priest lowered the chalice to her lips and said, "The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life."

Stunned, the young man experienced the boundary-breaking, bad policy-defying, reconciling mission of the Living God. He drank the wine and was forever changed. This couple married, and one of their children grew to become the current Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry.

In light of this story of how his parents experienced the Episcopal Church, Curry says, “Communion is a sacrament of unity that overcomes even the deepest estrangements between human beings.” Deep estrangement exists today, whether based on political beliefs, socio-economic statuses, or the different ways we experience the world because of our race, creed, or sexual orientation. We need a way of bridging those gaps, because until we can find unity among ourselves, we will struggle to find union with God.

Jesus says in Saint John’s account that, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” This is, understandably, a difficult teaching for those crowds that followed Jesus. In fact, we are told that “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” For many today—especially those that have little familiarity with sharing in the bread and wine of Holy Communion—this continues to be a difficult teaching, one that may often be depicted as archaic or even disturbing and absurd. Any reasonable person can understand this perspective; however, there is always more to Jesus than meets the eye.

Loye Bradley Ashton, in his contribution to the *Feasting on the Word* series, suggests that the problem here is the lack of a proper understanding of the Incarnation—that we seem to confuse “the body as flesh *without* spirit with the body as incarnate, flesh *with* spirit.” Because of this confusion, we tend to consume “the world without appreciating how God has infused creation with the Spirit; thus we use and discard it in crude and materialist ways,” which includes the way we treat our environment and the way we treat each other.

“The ethical imperative at the heart of John’s incarnational theology of the Eucharist is clear,” Ashton writes. “Will we treat the world around us as incarnational or simply as material?”

This is a hard teaching, indeed, as it requires an incredibly thoughtful approach to the world—one that calls us beyond the comfort of routines that satisfy our immediate needs and even our own sense of fulfillment. If we treat the world—the whole world—as incarnational, we will need to include people we despise. Not only will we need to *include* them, we will need to put our faith in them and in the Living God’s agency in their lives.

By sharing in the Eucharist, we share in an experience of the Living God that breaks down walls. By *living* Eucharistically, we seek to recognize the Living God in others, and by doing so, we are able to embrace one another as the gifts. Do you remember the exuberance you felt as a child on Christmas morning (maybe you still feel this way) as you opened presents and joyfully or frantically tried to play with all of them at once? What if we treated everything and everyone with that kind of exuberance—as if everything and everyone were a gift?

By living a Eucharistic life, we might find ways to break down the walls that divide us and see those from different backgrounds and those with different beliefs as gifts from the God who created them. This is the way Jesus lived: as if everyone possessed something special that was worth getting to know and worth connecting with on a truly human level.

This is the way Jesus lived, and this is the way we can live. This is the way God *lives* among us today. *Now* is the time of Jesus Christ. He is not dead, he is risen. Alleluia!

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