

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15) – Year B – August 16, 2009

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

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“Christianity... is in a profound sense the end of all religion,” says Dr. Alexander Schmemmann. And he continues, “Religion is needed where there is a wall of separation between God and [humanity]. But Christ who is both God and [human] has broken down the wall between [humanity] and God. He has inaugurated a new life, not a new religion.” End quote. If that has caught your attention, then what about this. Jesus gives bread. Jesus says, “I am the true bread from heaven”, and at the culmination of His sermon, Jesus gets down to the most gruesome details in words that still have the power to make us grimace a little, step back, or move swiftly into intellectual rationalization. “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.” We are down to the wire. Our time is up and we must choose to bite deeply, or cut loose. Even as the words left the mouth of *the* Word, many chose the latter course of action, and some still do.

Here’s some more food for thought. We are all consumers. We consume food to stay healthy and vital. We consume the resources of the earth to stay warm, to heat our homes, to drive our cars, to make an endless variety of consumables for you and me to buy, use and discard. So I wonder why we are so shocked that Jesus tells us to consume Him in order to have life in Spirit and in Truth. And if we are consuming Him, then is He consuming us as well? Few of us would be inclined to take Jesus’ words literally. The Judean leaders also objected strenuously to what Jesus said. Their objection, no doubt, is the same one dwelling in our own hearts, the repulsive suggestion that we should eat the flesh of another human being. But even more offensive to the Jews was Jesus’ command to drink his blood as well as eat his flesh. The Torah strictly forbids ingestion of the blood of any sacrificial animal. The blood is where the life dwells, and the life belongs only to God (Leviticus 17:14). Within Jesus’ offering of Himself for the life of the world, there are distinct and highly exclusive claims. There is gift, in and through Jesus’ personal offering – His alone, no other’s. And there is life – authentic life now, and life everlasting in the age to come. There is also an explicit warning to those who do not assimilate the true bread from heaven. Unless you eat and drink of Christ’s flesh and blood, you have no life in you.

This is meaty theology indeed, and even in these pluralistic times, we really cannot avoid where Jesus has been leading us in these last several weeks. If this were any other Gospel account, we may quickly jump to the conclusion that Jesus’ words are allusions to the sacramental rite that He initiated at the Last Supper, and one which we celebrate at the Lord’s Table each week. If it were Matthew, Mark or Luke then we would have a clear account of the institution of the Eucharist and a basis for such a claim. The troubling thing is that this is the Gospel of John, and no such account appears in *its* chapters or verses. So are we justified to make that connection, or not? In every account of the Last Supper, Jesus breaks the bread and says, “This is my body”. In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells us to eat of His flesh. Perhaps it doesn’t sound like a big difference until we realize that the word “flesh” is never used in connection with the sacrament of Holy Communion, only the word “body”.

The wonderful thing about our faith traditions is that (a) we do not check our brains at the door; and (b) there is a continuing conversation between Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Even inasmuch as the early church father, John Chrysostom reflected on the sacramental reference of this text, thousands of years later, Martin Luther rejected that connection. In Chrysostom’s homily on this passage he remarks, that it is “characteristic of those who greatly love [that Christ] brought his body down to our level, namely that we might be one with Him as the body is joined with the head.” Instead, Luther states that “the reason Jesus speaks of ‘eating’ and ‘drinking’ his ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ when calling his hearers to believe in him, is that he wants people who are already familiar ... with eating and drinking to recognize by comparison what his words surely do *not* mean.” Luther argues that it is the “my” that defines the “flesh”. In other words, only the bread sent from heaven can give the gift of eternal life, and yet there is more to that gift than intellectual assent or external rituals. You and I are also invited into the ongoing conversation with Scripture to offer our own thoughts and insights. Are we inclined, with

Chrysostom, to accept a clean, sanitized sacramental action as the deepest meaning we can glean from this text, knowing that its inauguration is rooted in God's love, and if so, why? Is it because what Jesus actually says in this Gospel is repugnant to us? How then would we answer Luther's suggestion that we look beyond the unholy literalism of Jesus' words, in the context of John's Gospel, to see that there is more here than a sacramental rite?

If, as Schmemmann proposes, that Christianity is the end of all religion, then how does his assertion inform our understanding of this text? Especially given that through the incarnation, the wall between humanity and God has been demolished for all time in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. How about a little more to add to the mix? Perhaps a slice of post-enlightenment rationalism. What is the truth behind German philosopher, Feuerbach's, statement, "you are what you eat"? As Luther would tell us, we are not literally burgers or steaks, carrots or cheesecake, but we are alive and in various states of health by virtue of the food choices we habitually make. For example, we all know that a steady diet of junk food and soda is not healthy; and that if all we ate was steak, steak and more steak, we would surely die from vitamin deficiencies, among other things. Yet, there is more to what we consume than we might at first think. In fact, there are two aspects of our consumables that we need to consider. The first is that what we see, hear and spend time doing are also an integral part of our overall nutrition – physical, spiritual, and mental. I don't think you have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that watching hours of violence on TV, at the movies, or playing video games, has to have a profound effect on the viewer's brain, and how that individual might view violence in the real world. The second aspect is also part of who we are as consumers. When we fill our time, the space of our lives, and presence in this world with the stuff of the world, then how much room are we creating, making or leaving for Christ's presence in us, and through us, as the Body of Christ?

Truly, there is no life in us, if we have filled ourselves with perishable food, redundant consumables, and worthless idols. Luther also said this: "The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding." And that is entirely the point. As Christians, our greatest hunger is for our Lord Jesus. Jesus became what we are, so that we might become as He is. Jesus sinks Himself into humanity, so that we might sink ourselves into Him, feed on Him, nourish ourselves in the Word and grow in Him. Jesus' incarnate presence on earth, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell within each believer, is so unique, because it was, it is, and it will be. We do become what we eat. The Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist strengthens us physically and spiritually. We become what we consume, by giving our thoughts and time, our deeds and our whole selves to God's presence and guidance in all circumstances. Jesus tells us that He is not just seeking intellectual acquiescence through faith. He is not just looking for external rituals done in remembrance of Him. Jesus desires more. This graphic, incarnational Gospel reminds us that Jesus intends to have all of us, body and soul, and that when we give our lives to Christ, Jesus truly becomes present in us and to us. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is integral to our hearts and minds, our bodies and our flesh, at the deepest and most intimate level of engagement possible. In our faith, we are blessed with true and holy communion with God. Through Scripture and the Word made flesh -- the signposts to salvation -- we see and understand, with Schmemmann, that "all that exists is God's gift to [humanity], and it all exists to make God known to [us], to make [our] life communion with God. It is divine love made food [and] life for [all in and through Christ Jesus, our Lord]".

Amen.