

August 2, 2009. 9 Pentecost, Proper 13B The Bread of Life
Saint Peter's Church, Glenside

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." John 6:35

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our friend and our food for life. Amen.

This entire passage in John's Gospel reflects the growing understanding on the part of the first century Christian community of what the Eucharist had come to mean to them. John, writing about a half-century after Jesus' death and Resurrection, sets out this understanding using the literary form of a dialogue between Jesus, his followers and his detractors. So this passage can best be understood not as a literal transcription of a conversation but as an exposition of the first century church's sacramental theology. John puts on Jesus' lips what the community had come to understand about the Eucharist, culminating in next week's reading which has Jesus affirming: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven ... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I abide in them."

The early church had come to understand that the Lord's Supper was nothing less than participation in the very life of Jesus and of God. It's no coincidence that the phrase "The Body of Christ" is used to refer both to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper **and** to the Community of Christ-followers, the church. You and I CONSUME the body of Christ. AND you and I BECOME the body of Christ.

Reading this passage in preparation for this sermon, I reflected on the variety of times and places I have broken the bread of life and celebrated the Eucharist during the 47 years I've been a priest.

Many, many times I celebrated in a living room with a small group of men and women who had been opening their souls to one another and sharing their lives, their tears, their agonies and joys and laughter.

Several times I have had the privilege of celebrating communion at midnight in the largest cathedral in the world, with a hundred and fifty awe-struck teenagers holding candles before the high altar of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine.

On hundreds of occasions I have celebrated in nursing homes and hospital rooms, sometimes surrounded by the odor of urine and with the plaintive murmur of senile residents or the moaning of patients as background music.

For three years I celebrated in Okinawa, Japan, and occasionally it was in a thatched-roof church building with all of our shoes neatly lined up outside the door.

For five years I celebrated in a downtown church in Santo Domingo with Dominican university students and British West Indian laborers and Canadian and American and British residents. Several times our liturgy was punctuated by shouts and gunshots in the distance and the faint smell of tear gas in that nation of much unrest.

I have celebrated communion in Uganda and Guatemala and Israel and Taiwan and Hong Kong and Japan and Costa Rica, in England and Scotland and even in a ship on the high seas.

For 20 years I broke the bread and shared the cup in a little church building that once had been a one-room schoolhouse in Bucks County, as the rector of Good Shepherd Church. And, for the past decade in many different parishes in this diocese, especially here at St. Peter's as "Our Own Frank Toia"!

I hope you will forgive this little nostalgic reverie. I share it in order to say to you that this simple act of sharing bread and wine is one of the threads woven into the fabric of my life's journey and I suspect that, in your own way, that's the case with you as well.

Down through the centuries, literally billions of people in thousands of different languages have shared the bread and the cup; sometimes with great ceremony and pageantry, with incense, colorful costumes, magnificent music and thousands of participants. Sometimes in quiet simplicity with just a couple of people present. Always in response to the words "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I abide in them."

Twenty centuries ago, struggling to articulate what the early church had come to believe about the Eucharist, John wrote these words. Since then whole libraries of books have been written by learned scholars about the nature of this sacrament. And still its power remains a mystery! In some unseen and incomprehensible way, the energy of redeeming love is transmitted and we receive spiritual food for life. By faith, we allow Christ's life to penetrate our being and nourish our own life.

And so we gather again this morning to share the last meal of a condemned man, which is, at the same time, the first meal of redeemed humankind.

Our host and our nourishment is a peasant carpenter who became an itinerant preacher, healer and activist on behalf of the poor. He was executed two thousand years ago in a remote outpost of the Roman Empire. In our coming together, we make the audacious claim that the glory and majesty and power of absolute love - that is, of God Almighty - is somehow focused in this person, Jesus. And we make the equally audacious claim that somehow - God knows how, we don't - but somehow our executed host is HERE in the midst of our celebration - to receive us and to be received by us.

AND to transform us! We receive the Body of Christ that we may become the Body of Christ – Christ's means of acting and moving and speaking and healing and redeeming in this world. The hands that receive the Body of Christ become the hands of Christ's Body, the Church. As St. Theresa famously put it, "Christ has no hands on earth but your hands to do God's will."

This is the sacrament of unity - the sacrament of oneness - the Holy Communion. When we gather around this table to take God's life into our lives - to be united with God and transformed by God we are also inextricably united to one another - members of the same family - limbs of the same body.

"We who are many are one body for we share in one bread, one cup." Thanks be to God for this sacred mystery of life. Amen.