

Proper 15 B

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The Gift and Grace of Communion

This past week I was at Pendle Hill Quaker Retreat Center near Swarthmore College. Every year I go on retreat with the same group of clergy friends. Five years ago we found each other through a program called the First Parish Project. It was designed to bring together young clergy in their first calls for fellowship, study and worship. We met several times over a two year period and at the end of our program decided that the relationships we had built needed to continue. And so now we gather every summer for five days. I am the only Episcopalian among a group of Lutheran, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian and Baptist pastors. We come from all corners of the country: California, Florida, New Hampshire and everywhere in between. We share a common and yet unique experience as thirty somethings who are ordained clergy.

Over the years we have shared our joys and sorrows, struggles and blessings not only in our lives as ministers, but in our personal lives, as well. With each other we have grieved the death of family members, endured the pain of divorce and struggled with infertility issues. At the same time we have celebrated the birth of seven children among us and the adoption of one, we have rejoiced in new relationships and marriages, new calls to parishes and personal triumphs such as: running a marathon, getting a doctoral degree and publishing a book. This is the kind of community that even after being away from each other for an entire year, once reunited we feel at home in each other's presence almost immediately.

The best thing for me about this community is our time of worship. Very early on in our program one of our instructors named us, "The Singing Pastors." Almost without exception we are a group of individuals who can and love to sing. In our singing, our praying and breaking bread together, the richness of the Eucharistic is revealed. I, the Episcopalian, have come to appreciate in new ways my own Church's tradition of the Eucharist by worshiping with those do not have the Eucharist as a central part of their identity. Through this community of friends, I have come to understand more deeply the gift of communion: of life lived together with one another and of life lived together in Christ.

Today, we hear another piece from the 6th chapter of John's gospel as Jesus continues his discourse on the bread of life. The verses this morning further develop Eucharistic themes of communion. Of all Jesus' words in John's 6th chapter, these are the hardest to swallow. Jesus declares that "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." This graphic language can make non-Christians and Christians alike a little squeamish. It's no wonder that in the earliest days of the Church Christians were condemned for their so-called acts of cannibalism. However, as uncomfortable as these words may be to us, we should not shy away from them. For in them we are told of Jesus' abiding presence among us when we gather around the table and share in the bread and cup.

Food and drink is something we can not live without. It nourishes and sustains our bodies, gives us strength and vitality. To eat of Jesus and to drink of Jesus is to say that we need him for sustenance. We need him for our very survival. As food and drink revitalize our bodies, Jesus revitalizes our souls. To eat of Jesus and drink of Jesus is to

be so intimately connected to him that we make him a part of our own bodies, our own flesh and blood. It is by making Jesus integral to who we are that we experience the fullness of life. Using this graphic language Jesus says to us that we have to move beyond belief into participation, active and personal participation, in the divine life. We are reminded that life is meant to be lived together: in community.

To share our lives with one another is by no means an easy thing to do. I love my First Parish Project friends and cherish the time we enjoy together as a community.

However, it has required great commitment, honesty, patience, and forgiveness on all our parts in order to remain connected. Any relationship or community worth its salt requires such a determined effort. To be called the people of St. Peter's Church means we must be willing not only to show up and pray together on Sunday mornings or even to engage in active ministry with one another, but also to share our burdens and fears, hopes and joys with one another. It means we must be willing to be so intimately connected to one another that we become a part of each other, that we need each other for sustenance and vitality.

In so doing, we experience the grace of communion: that when we are intimately connected to one another, we can't help but be connected to Jesus. And when we are intimately connected to Jesus, we can't help but be intimately connected to one another. Every Sunday we are invited to partake of the bread and cup in order to become active participants in this holy communion with God and one another. As we eat and drink of Jesus, we abide in him and he in us, and we abide in those gathered at the altar rail with us. When we allow ourselves to come to the table with our brothers and sisters and to share in our broken and blessed lives with one another, we find a fullness of life that can be experienced in no other way. We find a fullness of life that comes only from God.

So, friends, may we take and eat freely of Jesus. May we drink deeply from Jesus. And may we continue to be Eucharistic people: sharing our lives with one another just as Jesus shares his very life with us, experiencing together the gift and grace of communion.