

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Proper 14, Year B, August 12, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Holy Communion, Holy Mystery"
John 6:35, 41-51

this is the third Sunday in a row that the Gospel reading is from John chapter 6, and this will continue for two more Sundays before we get a change of chapter and a change of topic; so over the course of five weeks we will have heard almost all of this chapter, and it is basically all about the same thing: it's about miraculous food

the chapter started with the feeding of the 5000; then Jesus talks at length about how he is the bread of life, the living bread that came down from heaven, that his flesh is bread, that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood, how eating his flesh and drinking his blood leads us to live in him and he in us, and on into eternal life; with multiple references to how this is more miraculous than the manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness

so today I want to address the theology of Holy Eucharist, of Holy Communion, and take a close look at this miraculous food that we so reverently share; I am aware, as I attempt this, that Holy Communion is essentially an activity which cannot adequately be described with words; anyone's best attempts to explain it will fall short; it is, and will remain, as we say in our Post-Eucharistic Prayer, a holy mystery

also, in many ways, Holy Communion is more of a bodily activity than a mental activity; we don't have to understand what we're doing as we walk forward, extend our hands, receive the wafer and chalice, chew, swallow, walk back to our pew; this makes perfect sense for an incarnational faith like ours, which believes Jesus brought his full divinity to live within a fully human life on this earth; and it is hard to characterize bodily actions with intellectual explanations; that's why Holy Communion can usually be better experienced than understood; so, with this caution in mind, what I will offer are more images than explanations, to this question: how is it that a wafer of bread and a sip or dip of wine can change our lives now, and forever?

in a physical sense, in Holy Communion we eat bread and wine; so think how food and drink work upon our bodies; the nutrients, carbs, vitamins,

minerals, sugars, fats (!), whatever makes up the food we ingest, is changed within us into the very stuff of the cells that make up our bodies—we literally are what we eat

this is also true of Holy Communion's bread and wine, which even though it comes to us in very small portions, becomes a part of us; while each of us may eat very different diets in our homes, when we eat this Holy Communion meal here in church we are all eating and drinking the same thing; so those shared 'elements' (note that word is used in both scientific and religious terminology) give us all the same thing, in a way that gives us all a shared bodily make-up—we all together are what we have eaten together, and that binds us all together in a special way we could not be otherwise; and when I say 'all', I mean all Christians who ever have, are now, or will in the future receive Holy Communion in any church or denomination, in any country, in any language—that's what is meant by the term "Communion of Saints"; by receiving Holy Communion we are all in an eternal communion with each other—all Christians sharing Christ's holy food, across all time and all places

also, in a spiritual sense, in Holy Communion we call this bread and wine 'body' and 'blood'; so think how, in a medical sense, body and blood are put to work to protect, repair, or strengthen our bodies; a transplant of body tissues or a transfusion of blood replaces something damaged or deficient in a body, to the extent that that body could not function properly without it or even to the extent that it could not live without it—we literally can be healed and kept alive by receiving, medically, some portions of someone else's body or someone else's blood

this is also true of Holy Communion's body and blood; that's one of the reasons we, as the Church (capital C), are known as the 'body' of Christ—because Christ's body and blood has become part of our bodies and part of our blood; because of Holy Communion, Christ is present within us and flows through our veins; also we all suffer from the same kinds of spiritual weaknesses and illnesses, just by virtue of being human; we all need the same kind of remedy and healing that are brought to us by Christ's spiritually medicinal body and blood; through the work of Holy Communion upon us we are given the potential to become the healed and whole humans who do our best to embody Christ in our actions, in our decisions, in our words, in our entire lives; and that extends beyond our life on this earth

I know this is theologically heady stuff, but both of these images—the food image of the bread and wine, the medical image of the body and blood—bring us two important reminders about how Holy Communion changes our lives now, and forever

first, receiving Holy Communion, as personally as you may feel it when you receive it, is as much a group activity as an individual one; it is as much about our relationship to God—together—as it is about each of our individual relationships with God; Holy Communion connects us to each other through God, and connects us to God through each other, in a way that persists forever; look around you: these are some of the people with whom you will be spending eternity (that's one reason why we need to be nice to each other now, in this life!)

second, through Holy Communion each of us is given a renewed and powerful strength; we are to use that strength, use that energy, to be Christ's body, to be Christ's hands, to be Christ's feet, and to be Christ's voice, out in our world that so needs them; Holy Communion is as much about what happens outside of the church as what happens within it; and it is as much about what happens in this life as in the next

I invite you to keep this imagery and these reminders in your minds, hearts, and souls as you come forward for Holy Communion today and in the future; equally, I invite you to keep this imagery and these reminders in your minds, hearts, and souls as you go forth from this service and out into the world, today and in the future, carrying Christ's life-body and life-blood within you; the act of receiving Holy Communion changes us, and through us, it changes the world