

“Good Food”

All month we have heard portions of the Gospel of John having to do with bread. Specifically, with the flesh of Jesus being the bread from heaven, the bread of life. It seems to me that John spends an awful lot of time discussing this concept. I wonder why.

I wonder if his congregation was particularly thickheaded. For some reason the whole bread metaphor just did not ring true to them. Perhaps they got caught up in the idea of eating the flesh of Jesus. Early opponents of the Christians accused them of being cannibals, because they were eating the flesh of Jesus and drinking his blood. I wonder if there were those in his congregation who thought the idea, even as a metaphor was too icky to take part in.

For that matter, I wonder if any of you have been disturbed by the concepts behind Holy Communion. Has anyone ever thought they did not understand the metaphor of the bread and the wine? Even as a child? How about the idea that you were eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus? Did that ever make you uncomfortable or put off your participation in Holy Communion?

I do not remember ever being uncomfortable about consuming the body and blood of Christ. Perhaps it is because I grew up in the Southern Baptist Church. There the meal was a remembrance of the Last Supper. The Roman Catholic concept of transubstantiation, that is the blessing of the bread and wine transforms the substance of the elements into the actual body and blood of Christ while they still appear to be just bread and wine. That could have been a hurdle for me if I had encountered that theology at a young age.

What I remember as a youngster was how much I wanted to participate in Holy Communion. As Baptists we did not have Communion each week. I think it was quarterly. Each time we had communion the plate with bread was passed along with the tray of little cups of juice. Once everyone had the bread and wine, the congregation consumed them simultaneously. Prior to being baptized, each time we had Communion I was tempted to snatch a little cube of bread so I could take part. The little cup of grape juice did not hold the same allure for me as the bread did. It felt to me like the bread was what it was all about. I had to wait twelve and a half years to get a taste of communion bread.

I cannot remember why that little cube of white bread meant so much to me. It certainly wasn't the taste. That kind of bread has no taste, and it was so small I could swallow it without chewing it. Perhaps it was that getting to eat the bread meant I belonged. If I received the bread, then I was one of the community and not an outsider. But I don't think that was the real attraction, because drinking the juice was also a sign of belonging and I was not drawn to it.

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The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
10:00 a.m.
August 22, 2021

Those cubes of white bread and now the disks of wheat have always been precious and life giving to me. Since the day that I was first allowed to eat the bread and drink the juice I have felt a special connection to this food. It was also the experience of receiving communion that at age 29 that changed my life, and brought me back to the faith and into the Episcopal Church. That little disk of wheat in April 1985 started me on a trajectory that brought me to church work, seminary, the priesthood, and here.

This bread, as Jesus said earlier in this chapter, is the bread of life. It does more than satisfy our hunger pangs, which return after a while. Eating this bread satisfies the hunger of our heart. It is the longing we have to be in union with the power that created the universe and us. This is a hunger that can only be sated with Divine food, the bread of angels, the bread of life.

God offers us this food not because we have earned it or because we are particularly deserving. Indeed, God offers us this food because we are as we are. We have offered our individual selves through baptism, prayer, and confession back to God the one who created us, sustains us, and redeems us. Let us, as Joshua did, declare our covenant with the Lord. Let us choose the righteous path as the psalmist did. Let us choose the path that leads to the table where heavenly food is served; the bread that gives us life. It will surely change your life as it changed mine. This bread is wonderful, filled with wonder, it truly is wonder bread.