



Re-membering The Body

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost~August 19, 2018

Proverbs 9:1-6

Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her servant girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, "You that are simple, turn in here!" To those without sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight."

Psalms 34:9-14

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| 9 | Fear the Most High, you that are God's saints, * for those who fear God lack nothing. | 12 | Who among you loves life * and desires long life to enjoy prosperity? |
| 10 | The young lions lack and suffer hunger, * but those who seek God lack nothing that is good. | 13 | Keep your tongue from evil-speaking * and your lips from lying words. |
| 11 | Come, children, and listen to me; * I will teach you the fear of God. | 14 | Turn from evil and do good; * seek peace and pursue it. |

Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

John 6:51-58

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "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. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

It's a good question. An authentic question.

And it's a familiar question, too. It's a question, I get probably once a month at the Children's Service. For those of you who've never worshiped with us over in the school auditorium, we celebrate Communion each week around an Ikea coffee table. Many of the children come in close for the Eucharistic prayer, putting their hands and faces all over the table, trying to get as close to the action as possible. Sometimes, they raise their arms to join me in prayer. And occasionally, their little hands just can't resist reaching out to grab at the chalice. But I'm attentive and swift, and it's a point of pride for me that no wine has yet been spilled under my supervision.

Often the children's service can be quite raucous and chaotic. But more often than not there's one moment in the service when things get really quiet. It's like somehow the kids know: this part really matters. It's also the part of the service that I have memorized, so I can look into their eyes when I say it. I usually get a little quieter, too. And I try to put some feeling into the words as I say them, try not to let them become rote.

“On the night before he died for us, Our Lord Jesus Christ took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it, gave it, to his disciples and said: Take, eat, this is my body given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.”

As a hush descends, sometimes a little voice will perk up into the quiet, and ask some variant of: Is that really his body? How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

It's always a little bit difficult for me to know how best to respond. Usually I whisper something like: good question, can I get back to you after communion? Sometimes I've just rushed on, too flummoxed to adequately engage the questioner. One time I said “it's really just bread.” This child seemed so confused and concerned, and I didn't want her to be afraid. It got even more dicey when blood came up. As if she was hearing these startling words for the very first time.

When I have my wits about me, I usually end up saying something like: Jesus shares himself with us in and through bread. It's really bread but it's also more than bread. Jesus promised to be truly with us whenever we eat it. He is here.

It's an okay answer, But it's not quite enough. It never fully satisfies me, and it makes me feel a bit fraudulent as a priest. I feel as if I should somehow have a better, more faithful answer.

A big part of me also wants to tell them: “yes, it's really his body.” It is real. More real than so many other things. Somehow, it's really his body, really his blood. He is here in a real, tangible, physical way.

I want them to know this real presence, to trust that Jesus can and does show up. In the flesh.

Indeed, for me, the embodiment of this sacrament is so important. Because before long, bodies will become really confusing for many kids. They're going to hear all kinds of messages about what having a body means, about what others think they're worth, what they can do and what they are for. In the process of living, they're also going to discover just how much joy and how much suffering the body can contain.

And they're going to find out, too, that the body can be a lonely place. That this envelope of skin can accumulate secrets and shame...as well as wisdom and intelligence. All of which can be profoundly difficult to share. Resisting language; transcending our usual modes of expression. Rendering us almost mute about vast swathes of our lived, embodied experience.

It can get really lonely in here, dwelling amidst all these inexpressible bodily truths.

And rather than trying to talk his way into the corporeal complexity of our lives, rather than relying on language to navigate those spaces in which we are most inarticulate, Jesus simply comes to us as bread, as wine. Jesus comes to sit a spell in our digestive tract, comes to be with us in the most intimate way— joining us in the haunted, holy hollows of our bodies. Inside. Where so much of the important stuff happens. Jesus asks to be allowed in. To be with us. To sanctify our experience of embodiment.

As theologian Emmanuel Falque says: “If the Word became flesh, it is first of all in order to speak to my flesh, and if he became body, it is in order to inhabit and transform my body. [Because] there is in me, whether I see it or not, a veritable “chaos of passions and impulses,” and it is this part of myself that God wants to join, in order that I would forget nothing of what I am and of who I am.”¹

And isn't our forgetting exactly the root of the problem?

1 <http://churchlife.nd.edu/2018/06/07/christ-doesnt-save-us-by-words-first-of-all-but-by-his-body/>

Forgetting where we come from, forgetting where we're going. Forgetting who we are and whose we are.

The Eucharist, then, is all about remembering. We remember that on the night before he died. We remember. We remember.

And as we remember him, he re-members us. Puts us back together. Re-membering. Making us once again members of our own lives, and of one another's. Because it's all too easy to become dis-membered. To become detached and disoriented. Living mindlessly on autopilot—distant from things that really matter and out of touch with the world around us.

To be re-membered, however, is not without risk. The remembering of the Eucharist is ultimately an act of dangerous memory. Because it invites us to remember, each week, what it is that happened to Jesus, how he suffered in the body, and how easy it can be to ignore the suffering of others.

Indeed, theologian Johann Metz posits that memories of human suffering: “make demands on us” and “make the present unsafe,” by “illuminat[ing] for a few moments and with a harsh and steady light the questionable nature of things [that] we have apparently come to terms with.”²

In the Holy Communion, Metz contends: “Christians allow themselves to be “interrupted” by the memory of human suffering which challenges [our] status quo and widens the horizons of our imagination, drawing us into deeper consciousness of and compassion for the victims of suffering.”³

There's room for suffering here. Including our own.

And yet we so often seem not to know it. Seem not to know that Jesus came for those who suffer. Seem not to know that the church of Jesus Christ is meant to be about the relief of suffering. That we are transformed into the body of Christ, so that we might know one another's needs, and be close enough to meet them. To alleviate suffering in our midst. And then from within a healed and healing community, to reach out in ever expanding circles of care.

The Eucharist is not primarily a pious, personal act, you see. It is a relational, fully embodied act. The Eucharist touches us in the body, so that we will begin to notice the sanctity of our own bodily life. And thus awakened, will become more sensitized to the bodily needs of one another. The Eucharist is meant to make bodies matter.

Ours. Others. The entirety of human flesh. Matters.

So Jesus' body matters, too. The physicality of his presence. His invitation to taste and see. He is here. With us. In us.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

So come, eat and drink. Receive the body of Christ. Become the body of Christ, broken for the sake of the world.

Amen.

2 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/voxnova/2009/09/12/we-will-never-forget-metz-memory-and-the-dangerous-spirituality-of-post-911-america-part-ii/>

3 Ibid.