

Most of the time, I think of the sermon as a reflection on the texts assigned for the day. Pretty straightforward, sometimes trying to think about how the text intersects with the week's news or some moment in my life or that weird thing my great-grandmother used to do. But once in a while, when the Holy Spirit gets a wild hair, it seems like the time I get in the pulpit is more suited to teaching than reflecting. And today is just one of those days. Because when Jesus starts talking about eating flesh and drinking blood, we all get a little squeamish, and when the Gospel makes us squeamish, we outta perk up. So what's going on here?

First off, you need to know that, because of when the Gospel of John was written, it's really important to the author to make it clear that Jesus has a real body and that having a real body matters. This Gospel was written later than any of the others, maybe as late as 120 AD, and around that time, another group was springing up: Christian Gnostics. They believed a lot of things, some of 'em pretty good, but for our purposes, what matters is that they did not believe that the Second Person of the Trinity became fully human in the body of Jesus. So, yes, to them he had a body and walked around and did things, but he did those things in a sort of human husk, like the Body Snatchers of Sci Fi Past. This really matters when we get to the cross: for Christian Gnostics, Jesus' human body suffers, but he doesn't. Some say he left the body before the crucifixion began, some say he was there the whole time but impervious to the damage done, some say he was more like a puppetmaster for a marionette, so he could mimic what pain looked like but certainly didn't experience it. I'm sure you can see why this is a problem. So, when the author of John writes, they take great pains to establish that he has a body throughout the gospel. He eats, he drinks, he gets tired and thirsty and touches a lot. He is fully embodied and all that comes with it. So by the time we get to today's reading, we're used to Jesus being connected to real bodily things, but even this goes a little far. Yes, we know Jesus has flesh and blood, but now he wants us to eat it? Gross.

There's another thing going at the same time as all this Gnostic stuff, too. John was written just after the religious authorities started kicking followers of Jesus out of the synagogue. As a response, this worshipping community tried to do two things at the same time: prove their "Jewishness" by being extra rooted in Hebrew Scriptures AND establish themselves as the better way to God. As modern readers, this puts us in a really delicate spot. But think about it, whenever a group is ostracized, they do the same thing. They become at the same time, hyperorthodox and proud of what makes them unique. This Christian community was no different. So Jesus is calling back to a time when food from Heaven fell from the sky and sustained another people separated from what they were and on the way to becoming something new. It's manna in the wilderness! Only Jesus places himself as the thing that has come down from heaven to sustain the people, rooted in the old story and becoming something new at the same time.

And then there's the whole flesh and blood thing. As you might expect, eating a human's flesh and drinking anything's blood - not only are they the stuff of horror movies - these would make you ritually unclean. It's horrific at both the human and the religious levels at the same time. But here's the thing: Jesus isn't speaking literally. At no point in the gospel does this actually happen. He's speaking metaphorically, looking ahead in his own mind (and referencing the other Gospels) to the Last Supper when he'll hold up bread and chalice and say "this is my body and this is my blood. Eat and drink in remembrance of me." The people in the story are horrified because they don't know that's where he's going just yet, but those of us that do know the story, we know what he means. Eat this, drink this, and you will live with Christ forever. It's what we do every Sunday, at least every Sunday that we can. We remember our connection to Christ, we remember the very real bodily sacrifice and what he suffered, we remember all those connected to across time and place through this

very same meal, and then we move into the world with the kindergarten taunt “You are what you eat” echoing in our minds and, hopefully, our actions.

But there’s one other thing we need to talk about when we’re on the flesh and blood, bread and wine, Jesus and a church meal track. And that’s transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is a sort of theological boogie man for Episcopalians. One of the 39 Articles that defined the borders of Anglicanism back in the 16th Century condemns the doctrine of transubstantiation, but the idea still exists within our church. And I gotta admit, personally, I dig it. I won’t try to make y’all believe in it, but I do want y’all to know where it came from and what it actually means.

So, the origin of transubstantiation actually goes way back to Aristotle and his view of how the physical world worked. For Aristotle, basically, every thing had accidents and substance. Accidents were those physical attributes that made up a thing, like, take this prayer book. What are the physical attributes of this thing? It’s got weight and a certain number of pages, and those pages are made of particular materials. It has printed words on the inside, it has a cover, and the cover is made of certain material, too. Also, this one is a little worn down. It currently has a fair amount of duct tape replacing the original binding. Anyway, those are the accidents of this book. The substance of this book is more like its essence. All those accidents combine to make this physically unique, and then the substance is, more or less, how those accidents are expressed in its essence. For everything in the world, the accidents and the substance are connected. If you have the accidents of this book, you have the substance of this book. If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, right? Phew, ok, y’all still with me?

The early church writers started using that flesh and blood language, the same language Jesus used for the Last Supper, pretty much as soon as they started writing about it. And it was this understanding of accidents and substance that informed their approach to the idea of what happens to the bread and the wine at Eucharist. Except, for them, they made Eucharist the singular exception to the rule. For everything else, accidents and substance are connected. But not here. What are the accidents of bread? (Invite congregation to chime in) And wine? (Invite again) Great! So, for bread, you have wheat and salt and yeast or no yeast, and for wine you have grapes and sugar and alcohol. And all those accidents come together to give us the substance or essence of bread and the essence of wine. And then we say the Eucharistic prayer, and as this body gathers and prays and joins our hearts to God’s, something changes. Transubstantiation says it’s the substance of the bread and wine that change. The bread retains the accidents of bread, the wine retains the accidents of wine, but the substance becomes the essence of Christ. “Trans-substanced,” changed into the flesh and blood of Jesus but still bread and wine, too. That’s the origin of transubstantiation. Anything more involved than that is a divergence.

There are all kinds of stories throughout history that miss this point. Missionaries used to get run out of town for telling people to eat their God’s flesh - no one likes a cannibal. One particularly imaginative and overly zealous author wrote of the sacred horror he “witnessed” when he had a vision of the Christmas Baby Jesus held high at the altar and torn in two for the congregation to consume. But it’s not always that gruesome. Sometimes, it’s just plain superstitious. Farmers back in the Middle Ages used to receive the bread, and then squirrel it away in their cheeks, only to plant it in their fields at home in the hopes of a Christ-enriched harvest. One tale tells of a farmer that planned on doing just that, but about halfway home he started feeling guilty, so he took the bread out of his mouth and threw it into the sea. Only, just as he let go the Body of Christ, a dove swooped down, caught it, and returned it to his outstretched hand. But my absolute favorite of these stories is one of a faithful beekeeper. He got home with that bread in his cheek and, hoping it would help his bees produce more honey, he shoved the Body of Christ into his bee box and left them there to do their thing. Come honey harvest time, he removed the cover of the box expecting to see gallons of honey, but instead there was none. He saw the bees all still, alive but surrounding a strange structure of their own creation: a single wax altar with the bread on top. Even the bees themselves could sense the change!

I love those stories. They're beautiful and imaginative and sometimes a little freaky, but they point to something really important in our life as church. See, our tradition is chock-full of things like the Eucharist that we do or say but probably don't fully understand. "Mystery" is a regular occurrence in our faith. And that's not a bad thing! I actually think it's a strength of ours. But, we have to be careful that we don't let mystery seep into the world of superstition. And worse, into the realm of justifying whatever we want it to. Mystery is a challenge to us, not an excuse.

Throughout this pandemic, we have had our relationship with the Eucharist changed more times than I can remember. We had a week or two of cautious reception, then over a year of no Eucharist at all, changing not just what we ate together but even the words we prayed, and now we find ourselves consuming again, thanks be to God, but in an unusual way. With the Delta Variant ramping up, we may have to change again, I don't know. But what I do know is that whatever each of us believes about what happens at that altar, when we can't receive, we feel the absence not just of bread and wine but of the connection to the real body of Jesus Christ, both in bread and wine and in the people that share your pew.

Today we are celebrating not just here at this table, but at another, the table so lovingly set by Millie and her crew. We're celebrating the many years we've had with Helen and Marlene. It's a bittersweet thing to say goodbye to members of our own body, but we send them off to their new homes knowing that we will always remain connected through this great body we serve. Sure, the altars they attend will be far from Hamilton, but it's always the same banquet, always the same flesh and blood, always the same Body of Christ. Yes, these words of Jesus' can come off a little strange, maybe even gruesome, but when we get down into the meat of it all, what Jesus invites us into in this meal is nothing short of miracle and mystery. For in this meal, we, all of us, no matter where we are, we abide in him, and he in us.