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John 6:51-58
 Proverbs 9:1-6
 Psalm 34:9-14
 Ephesians 5:15-20

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 The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Be honest this morning. How many of you cringed a little when I read the Gospel passage? More precisely...when you heard those words about all of this eating of flesh and drinking of blood...did you say to yourself – well, that just sounds gross. Or as one priest relayed in a blog post I read there was one particular Sunday when he said those words in the Eucharistic prayers, "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you." And one little girl in the congregation let a loud, EWWW!!!

After all, this text is so in your face, so graphic that it's hard to get through at times. And Jesus keeps hammering it into our minds as he says over and over in various ways that you must eat his flesh and drink his blood to have life.

I have to admit...every time I read our gospel passage I find myself wondering what a non-Christian would think if they read about all of this eating and drinking. I've been asked so many times by friends of other faiths – why in the world do you have to symbolize the eating and drinking of Jesus' own body? It makes no sense. Doesn't it make you uncomfortable?

That's a good question. And, if we stay at the surface level of understanding – at the Ewww factor, we might never understand the real meaning of what Christ is trying to teach.

We come to the text each week looking for hope, for wisdom, for reassurance. And then, we come to the altar each week for the same things – for a deeper connection to our faith and to God. To know that our faith is real and present and that somehow, some way, we get to touch and feel and taste something much bigger than ourselves. That in that very real process of the Eucharist we come to sense God's deep presence in our lives.

But still the question remains..why is this symbolism necessary?

If you try to answer that question, you may find yourself rather frustrated, just like the people Jesus is talking to in John. They can't grasp what he is telling them. They argue. They debate. And Jesus keeps saying over and over in every way he possibly can that this idea, this symbolism is important. In fact, he almost shouts out...I'm telling you the truth!! Don't you get it? This is what will give you real life.

And like this crowd gathered around Jesus, we are often frustrated as well. How will it give us life? How with this act of eating and drinking do anything to help me?

Let's back up a moment and let me suggest a way of understanding what Jesus is trying to teach. Sandra Schneiders, a prominent scholar on the Gospel of John, says that there is one

main message going on throughout this entire Gospel. It's trying to tell us that Jesus wants us to know him now – in the present. Not in some future, eternal realm but in the here and now. And what better way to help us understand that he is truly present with us in this moment than to physically eat and drink, to actually fill our bodies with that knowledge. And the only way he can communicate that reality is through symbols. And he chooses the symbols of his body and blood.

Just so we are on the same page...a symbol is defined as something that reveals a truth, something we need to know, by involving you in a relationship with the transcendent. Now, I know that's a rather hefty theological statement so let me restate it...another way to think of a symbol is something that draws you in to participate in a mystery, a mystery that is multi-faceted and open ended. A mystery that we can each come to and experience something unique.

What does that mean in terms of our Gospel? It means that Jesus is giving us a symbol of his love for us through his body and blood and he is asking us to participate, to get involved with that symbol. That's Step One. Get involved. Participate. He is saying do this – eat this bread, drink this wine because I want you to know week in and week out that I am here with you – in every time and in every place.

Schneiders' states that, "The symbol is an epiphany of present reality, not an indication of an absent one." ¹ A present reality, not an absent one. So eat and drink, Jesus is here!

But symbols also require a second step. Not only do they ask us to participate, but they ask us to be transformed. To allow the mystery to become a part of who we are. And Jesus is trying to show that through him, we are indeed transformed. That our life changes. That as the Psalmist states this week, those who seek the Lord, those who open to the mystery of God, lack no good thing.

OK...so there is a step one and a step two. But, what really happens within us? What is this transformation all about? How do we know that the symbol of Christ's body and blood is what draws us closer to God?

I wish I could give you an answer but the answer will be profoundly different for each of us. Remember that at the heart of a symbol is an open ended experience that is unique for each person who participates. But I can tell you this...when you open yourself to the mystery, you will feel God's presence so close that a wave of peace will wash over you. You will feel held and loved and renewed like nothing else could ever do. And it's the most beautiful comfort you can experience.

¹ Schneiders, Sandra M. *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. New York: Crossroad Pub, 1999.

So you come to the altar, ready to participate, knowing that whatever you bring on that given Sunday (because only you know what you bring to this altar, what burdens you bear, what fears, what hopes, what needs) ...you know that Christ is with you...today. You know that Christ loves you. And you eat and drink with that full assurance.

When I was doing my clinical pastoral education at Westminster Canterbury, I remember this one gentleman who struggled deeply with Alzheimer's. Most days he wouldn't communicate and when I tried to talk with him, he would often drift into his old work days, into another time and place. He talked about meetings and would tell me I had done a great job at work that day. He told me we should set up another meeting but he couldn't find his calendar at the moment.

Some days, he would get agitated and shake his hands and arms in deep frustration. While other days, he would drift into song and sing random notes, moving his hands as if conducting an orchestra. And he would smile the kindest smile to some unknown memory.

On one particular day I took him communion. He wasn't really aware of what he was doing so I gave him just a little bread dipped in tiny bit of wine and placed it in his mouth. And then something shifted...I asked if he would like a prayer and he didn't respond at first. He got slightly agitated and shook his hands. I then told him I would simply give him a blessing.

I offered the words, May the Lord Bless you and keep you.... And then, he began to say the words with me. I stopped speaking and let him finish the prayer....

May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.

He then looked at me and said it was his father's favorite prayer. I told him it was my favorite prayer as well. And then he drifted into random thoughts and words I couldn't understand. But for a moment, I knew he felt the presence of God. He ate and he drank and God was present and he was able to pray. This lovely gentleman, taken by Alzheimer's, somehow, somehow participated in that mystery of the bread and wine and he was transformed.

It was a comfort so profound.

That was Jesus was trying to teach. That is what he is offering. That is what he means when he says, I will give you life. I will give you life today.

Amen.