

Sermon for Proper 15 Year B

BY THE REV. KEN KESSELUS

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 and Psalm 111 (or Proverbs 9:1-6 and Psalm 34:9-14); Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Sometimes you have to wonder about after-church snacks, especially celebrations. Eating congratulatory cake doesn't make for a good pre-lunch appetizer, does it? Some parents oppose having cookies available for their little ones and insist on fruit or other more nutritious snacks. What's the hospitality committee to do?

Such minor controversy plays on the wider discussion about what we humans put into our stomachs. By now we are all familiar with the catchy and telling phrase "You are what you eat." The teachings are legion. A child who fails to receive proper nutrition might become sick or even die. Eating food high in cholesterol can produce heart disease. An excess of sugar can lead to diabetes. And a person eating a proper, healthy diet grows and prospers. Clearly, what we eat is important.

That's a central concept for us today because our gospel reading is all about eating. In it, we experience Jesus getting pretty graphic with his imagery. He said, "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. ... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

Jesus could well have said, "You are what you eat." He could have said, "If you don't eat that which is Christ, you have no life – no real life – no life that is of lasting and true value. If you do not eat of what I am, you will become malnourished and get sick and die, spiritually."

This is not unfamiliar territory in a denomination that values the Holy Communion. It might be instructive, however, to remember that the gospel reading we are considering comes from John and his version does not contain an account of the Last Supper, unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul, who relate the story of Jesus taking bread and wine and telling his disciples to eat and drink of it to re-call him to presence.

In that portion of the passion story that John recounts, he gives us the story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. And so, it is in the passage of today's gospel – John's version – that we don't hear about Jesus acting out the sacrament but we hear instead of Jesus teaching about its meaning. Jesus helps us understand what we know as an outward sign of a profound spiritual truth. Bread and wine, through the power and spirit of God, become for us what Jesus really is. And if we are faithful and committed, we can become what we eat.

In regard to the Holy Communion as we experience it in the twenty-first century, what do we know and how much do we know about this eating that Jesus gives us to do? What do we understand about it? How much do we have to know to get it right? How old do we have to be to know enough? Some parents and clergy puzzle over when the right time is to bring children to eat the food that Jesus bids us eat. This is based on the question of not cheapening the sacrament by feeding Jesus food to someone who doesn't know what it is. So, what is the proper age? When is the time of maturity, the moment when it can all make sense?

For generations, the time was set at confirmation. This would mean that individuals were well prepared and old enough to claim the faith for themselves, ready to discern the meaning of eating Jesus' holy meal. Others settled on a Roman Catholic-like "first communion" at age seven or eight. This view is based on the belief that children of such an age can understand enough about the Lord's Supper for it to have true meaning for them. Where does one draw the line? When is old enough really old enough? Perhaps a story from some years ago can be instructive. A priest abided by his bishop's directive to give communion to children only after they reached first grade and after both they and their parents had received adequate instruction. Sunday after Sunday his 4-year-old son came to the altar rail and lifted his little hands for the bread, but the priest smiled and reached down to touch his head in blessing. One day, as the priest reached down for the blessing, the son pushed his hands in defiance, and after his father continued to withhold the bread, the child shook his fist at him in anger. The boy was gesturing what he could not fully articulate: "You are giving out bread to everyone but me, and something is wrong about that."

The lesson taught by this preschooler is helpful. If he was able to understand being excluded, he was old enough to sense the importance of being included with those experiencing the feeding Jesus insisted will give spiritual health. This gives credence to those who desire to open the table to all baptized, to anyone able to take the bread and wine that is the Body of Christ. It is the same theological perspective as baptizing infants. It's not about us – not about what we initiate but what God does for us.

Feeding children the bread of heaven at an early age is like feeding them mother's milk or pouring out parental love on them. Isn't it powerful to think that children can grow up not having remembered a time when they did not eat at the table of the Lord? It would be like the reality of a good parent's love – the absence of which they never experienced.

As to what they understand or when they are able to understand it, who knows? But one thing is for sure, if we communicate children early, whenever the time comes for them to understand, they will be receiving the same sacrament of love as the rest of us. And who's to say that any of us understands everything about what Jesus meant when he said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life."

Don't we all continue to grow in our understanding of what this means? Why shouldn't we begin the learning at the earliest age? What's wrong with mothers and fathers guiding children at the altar rail, helping them learn to eat and drink the food that can help them learn to recognize themselves as part of the very body of Christ? What's wrong with parents whispering to children at the altar rail, "Remember, you are what you eat"?

We want children to eat of this special food because that is how they learn; that's how all of us learn. That is how we grow, through this feeding. And since we become what we eat, we need this food always.

We are what we eat; therefore, we must mind carefully what we eat and digest spiritually, for the health of our souls. The world offers us a lot of unhealthy diets – diets of materialism and greed and selfishness. Feeding on the word of God and partaking of the body and blood of Christ ensures life-sustaining nutrition for the spirit – food for the soul. By faith, eating the bread and wine of Holy Communion, we can enable the process by which Christ penetrates our beings and nourishes our lives. In this sacrament, God's very life comes to us through the elements of bread and wine so that we can

have union with God. We are re-called to the truth that this union with God through Jesus, the Christ, is the connecting link for us with all that is good and true and holy.

The early church writer Irenaeus said it this way: “The word of God, Jesus Christ, on account of his great love for mankind, became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.”

Jesus leaves himself with us and for us, and eating what is the Christ nourishes us into what he is – because we are what we eat.

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