



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 11 Proper 14 (B)

Abide in My Love

RCL: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Chapters 13 through 17 of John are by far the longest treatment of the Last Supper of any of the four gospels. These five chapters proclaim the heart of the Good News for John. And yet, have we ever noticed that from the opening of chapter 13, where Jesus strips down, gets on his knees, and washes feet, to chapters 15 through 17, where he does some mighty fine speechifying, in all of this longest portrayal of his last night with those he now calls friends, there is scarcely a mention of bread and none of wine? It's as if John decides that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and even Paul have covered the blessings over the bread and the wine more than adequately, and I will, says John, tease out what it really means to “do this in remembrance of me,” to live a Eucharistic life.

Enter our words from chapter 6, where John appears to set the institution of the Last Supper. That is, to place the institution in the midst of Jesus' ministry and day-to-day life. The chapter begins with the feeding of “about five thousand” people with a few loaves of bread and some fish. John pictures Jesus before a hungry crowd, a crowd that has taken to boats to cross the sea to find the One who is going about the countryside doing marvelous and miraculous things. They have heard about water becoming wine at a wedding reception in Cana. Some heard from the Samaritan woman herself about living water, and how she became the first person in John to recognize Jesus as the One who is to come. The One who takes, blesses, breaks, and gives away bread. The very same way we still take, bless, break, and give away bread in the Holy Eucharist.

Later, in the synagogue in Capernaum, he says astonishing things like, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” He also says, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” And he says again, “I am the bread of life... 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.” I am the bread. Feed on me. And as it was in his hometown synagogue, the people are now scandalized, forgetting all about the twelve baskets of leftovers after feeding the five thousand. “We know his mother and his father!” they say. “How dare he say these things!”

He urges them to stop complaining. I cannot help saying these things for I am the manna. I am the bread of the Eucharistic meal. I give my life, my body for the life of the world. All this in chapter 6 is John's

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institution of the Eucharist: bread is taken, blessed, broken, and given away – just as on Good Friday, Jesus will be taken, blessed by his Father, broken by us, and given away, handing over his Spirit to his community as his last act of charity, generosity, and love. Yet, it's all too much, the love that's shining all around him. It's all too much.

Now jump ahead to the Last Supper chapters, especially chapter 15, where Jesus makes two even more astonishing declarations about who we are and whose we are. First, Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” It is impossible for us to imagine just how much the Father loves Jesus, let alone begin to grasp the reality that Jesus, in turn, loves us that much! We hear it, we read it, year after year after year. We want to believe it is true. That just as God says Jesus is his Beloved Son at his baptism, so Jesus says that we too are God's Beloved. That God is well pleased with us. We hear this, and like the people in the synagogue, we wonder, “How can this be? How can we abide in this love of his?”

Jesus then doubles down on this love, as if the Great and Second commandments to love God and love neighbor are not quite enough to get to the heart of living a Eucharistic life. Jesus issues a new commandment: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” That, as Led Zeppelin reminds us, is a Whole Lotta Love. Love. For their Greek-speaking, Greek-hearing audiences, Paul and the four evangelists had a number of words to choose from. There is *eros*, that frenzied, passionate, ecstatic, and all-consuming love. There is *philia*, the love of equal for equal, friend for friend. But they all chose the word *agape*, which speaks of love in which the one who is loved is raised to the level of the one who loves. Jesus' love for us raises us to the level of his love, just as he has been raised to the level of the Father's love. We need to ponder the depth and breadth of this love we are to become as we abide in his love.

About this love, he says, “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.” He speaks not of immortal life or a future in heaven. Rather, this is “a metaphor for living now in the unending presence of God,”¹ what he sometimes calls the Kingdom of God. John places the institution of the Eucharist way back in the day-to-day life of Jesus and the things he does for others: feeding, healing, teaching, sharing meals. These are the things, and “greater things than these” which we are to do to abide in his love.

He calls us his Beloved. To accept our belovedness is to abide in his love. Once we accept this, when we look upon the host at communion, we no longer see just bread or the body of Christ. Rather, we are called to say, “Amen,” as we receive what we are to become.² What we are to become is the Body of Christ, and this is to shape our lives every moment of every day. Eucharist is not what Jesus does on one night near the end of his life, or what we do on Sundays. It is what he did, and we are to do, every moment of every day.³ This is what it means to abide in his love: to accept our belovedness and live a Eucharistic life as he lived. Eucharist means “thanksgiving” – lives of thanks and giving – giving his love to others.

¹ Gail O'Day and Susan Hylen, **John** (Westminster John Knox, Louisville: 2006) p. 75.

² Aidan Kavanaugh, “Christ Dying and Living Still” in **The Sacraments** (Alba House, New York: 1981) p. 271-272.

³ *Ibid.* O'Day and Hylen, p. 79.

Nothing can be more important or more powerful than accepting this Eucharistic life. Every time bread is taken, blessed, broken, and given to us, he calls us once again to abide in his love so we may live his love for others – all others, no matter what. This, he says, is eternal life. Here and now. Every day. By placing the institution of the Eucharist in the midst of Jesus’ life, not on his last night among us, John suggests that our participation in the flesh and blood, the bread and the wine, belongs to all the days of the Christian life, not just Sundays or special days, but every day we are to share the love and the abundant presence of God in the world – the whole world.

May God help us all to abide in this love of Christ, and of the Father. Amen.

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