

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

I went to a small Catholic liberal arts college founded by the Franciscan Sisters of Oldenburg in Indianapolis, where I ended up with a double major in Theology and Psychology, with a Music minor. That was all several - well – *many* years ago. Even after all these years, though, I still have a vivid memory of a day in one of my theology classes. I have no idea what class it even was. I remember the professor, but not his name. He wore a toupee, and we used to joke about the idea of dangling a fishhook from fishing line at the top of the doorframe to snag the toupee when he came into class. We never did. He would walk in precisely on time, sit at the desk, open the drawer and prop his 3-ring binder full of lecture notes in the drawer leaning against the desk. And one day, he said the following: “Christ – God - is no more present in the Eucharist than anywhere else.” The entire room full of students, who had been face down diligently writing down notes, suddenly raised their eyes and stared, aghast. And then he repeated that sentence. I’m sure I wasn’t alone in thinking, “This is a Catholic college! Does the college know what this man is teaching?!” He went on to explain, then, this particular theology of Eucharist. God is present *everywhere*. God IS. But we humans, mere mortals that we are, can’t focus on that. We can’t *understand* and let that reality permeate our beings. And so, in the Eucharist, in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup, we DO focus on the REAL PRESENCE of Christ in our midst. Christ is present in the bread and wine, but not MORE present in the bread and wine than anywhere else. That presence becomes REAL to us, because – for whatever time we keep it in our minds, our hearts, for however long we keep it in our attention – for however long we hold onto the recognition that Christ is present there, Christ’s presence is real for us.

I’ve chewed on those ideas for some 40 years now. I have knelt and sat in an “adoration chapel” – where the Consecrated Host was displayed on the altar – and found myself “lost” in the mere Presence of God so that the time seemed to pass without my knowing it. And I have many times come to a celebration of Eucharist and found myself untouched. I have given communion to many people – and sometimes it seems perfunctory – and sometimes I am so aware that I am giving the Body of Christ TO the Body of Christ.

Our Episcopal Catechism says, “The inward and spiritual grace in the Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ given to his people, and received by faith.” The range of how each person in the church interprets or experiences that is wide. What I have come to realize for myself is this: It’s not about the bread. It’s about the Presence, the focus, the relationship. It most certainly is about who God is, and who we are.

Our first reading today brings us Elijah, the great prophet. Just before this scene, Elijah has killed off all the prophets of the false god Baal, the god King Ahab had been worshipping with his wife Jezebel. And Jezebel has sent word to Elijah that she intends to kill him “by this time tomorrow.” So Elijah runs. He runs “a day’s journey” into the wilderness, which is where we pick up the story today. He has done what God asked of him, and then had to run for his life. And he says, essentially, “Okay, that’s enough. I’m finished. Let me die.” But God is not finished with Elijah. God provides food and drink for Elijah – in the *wilderness* – twice. And on the strength of that nourishment which God provided, he journeyed 40 days and 40 nights – to Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai - the Mount of God – the very place where Moses received the 10 commandments.

Several things are important here. First, as a link to last week’s readings, God provides the nourishment we need. We all have a journey ahead of us. But God will provide the nourishment we need, sometimes even when we would be content to lay down under a tree and stop, because God always calls us forward, deeper into relationship. What will come next for Elijah is that God will come to him at the mouth of that cave – not in a great wind, or an earthquake, or fire, but in the sheer silence. God is present in the sheer silence. God nourishes Elijah, and calls him into an experience of God he could not expect. God was not in the flash, but in the quiet. But the important thing is that God called Elijah into relationship with God, and God revealed Godself to Elijah.

When Moses was on Mt. Sinai, God revealed Godself in giving Moses the 10 commandments – out of which came the Law. When Elijah comes to Mt. Sinai, God reveals Godself as Silence, as sheer Presence.

And that takes us to John's Gospel – John, who says from the start that God has now revealed Godself in the Word become flesh. God is revealed in Jesus. And in today's Gospel, a continuation of last week's gospel passage and a precursor of more to come next week, Jesus again says, "I am the bread of life...I am the bread that came down from heaven...I am the living bread."

For John, God revealed Godself in Jesus. And in these "I AM" statements, Jesus is revealing God. God told Moses God's name – I AM; God led the people for 40 years in the wilderness, nourishing them all that time with manna from heaven, established a covenant of law with the people by giving Moses the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai. And this same God nourished Elijah in the wilderness, led him in a journey of 40 days and nights to the same mountain, and revealed Godself in sheer Silence to Elijah there.

And God revealed Godself in Jesus, the Word made flesh, who spent 40 days and nights in the desert before proclaiming the Good News – that the kingdom of God is near, not far away.

And in these first "I AM" statements that Jesus makes in the Gospel of John, Jesus is telling us who God is. God is revealing Godself in the words of Jesus. "I AM the bread of life" becomes "God is the bread of life. God is the living bread." Whoever eats – whoever takes in – whoever can see that the bread of our lives is GOD – will never die."

What is more common, more mundane than bread? It's part of every culture in some form. I may have misspoken at the beginning when I said, It's not about bread. Maybe I should have said it's *all* about bread. Because what I hear Jesus telling us is that here is God revealing Godself to us in the very stuff of our lives. God is bread for us. God, when we really take God in, when we pay attention, becomes the very fiber of our being.

What better way for God to get through to us that God is fully present to us ALL the time? How many times a day do we ‘interact’ with bread? We have toast for breakfast, and a sandwich for lunch, and dinner rolls or tacos or pita. If we, even for a second, recalled the real presence of God, in the here and now, every time we touched some form of bread, we would be coming closer to Paul’s exhortation to “pray always.”

The bottom line is this: I am not saying Christ is not present in the Eucharistic bread and wine. I believe Christ IS present in the Eucharist. And Christ is present in our *sharing* in the Eucharist. Christ is also present when Joan or Candy or Sandy or any of you take the Eucharist to one of our homebound parishioners. And Christ is present when you pass the dinner rolls around your family table, if you pay attention – if you can recognize the Presence, if God’s presence can be real to you there.

God is always revealing Godself to us. Sometimes we see it, and sometimes we don’t. The Presence doesn’t change. It’s our attention, our focus, that wavers. If we can practice – if we can, every time we touch a piece of bread, focus for a second on God being present – not just around us, but *within* us and within all the people and creatures around us – it will change us. It will change how we live, and how we live with one another.

So let us practice – and let us, as the letter to the Ephesians urges - “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love.”

Amen.

[1 Kings 19:4-8](#)

[Psalm 34:1-8](#)

[Ephesians 4:25-5:2](#)

[John 6:35, 41-51](#)