

August 16, 2015 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost John 6:51-58

Voltaire once wrote, "A long dispute means both parties are wrong." I hope that is not the case with our gospel reading for today. John 6:51-58 are the most disputed verses in John's gospel and among the most disputed verses in the Bible. Theologians from Roman Catholic to evangelical Christian churches have hotly debated what Jesus actually means and how literally the words are to be taken.

Perhaps it is tempting to simply say, "Oh, let the theologians and philosophers fight it out. I'm just going to be a plain old Christian who believes in Christ and not be too bothered." Maybe there is some value to that approach, but I feel we are the weaker for not wading into the controversial waters, for it is much deeper than an intellectual debate.

Long before the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century there were debates about the presence of Christ in the bread and wine of communion. Are Jesus' words, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life," to be taken literally? Is he speaking symbolically? How can this be? The bread and wine of communion look, taste, smell and feel like bread and

wine before, during and after communion. There's no noticeable supernatural transformation. What is going on?

If you have a Roman Catholic background you'll remember the explanation the church developed to explain this - the process of "transubstantiation." This is often criticized and misunderstood. It is actually a well-reasoned response to a conundrum. Briefly it is that the inner substantial reality of the bread and wine underlying its appearances has been transformed.

At the other end of the spectrum you have the idea mostly held by reformed churches - that the bread and wine are symbols of Christ's body and blood but do not undergo any significant transformation.

And in typical fashion you have the Lutheran and Episcopal churches seeing the value of Roman Catholic theology and leaning as close to it as possible, but not quite willing to adopt transubstantiation. Why not just accept transubstantiation if it an effective way out of a conundrum? Because it leads to a host of other problems beyond the scope of what we want to address today.

The point I want to stress today is the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine. If you have a Lutheran upbringing you probably remember phrases like Christ is present "under" or "in with and under" the bread and wine.

Why do this? Why not just say the bread and wine symbolize Christ and be done with it? Wouldn't that just be simpler and cleaner? After all, Jesus often used allegories and images in his teachings. Why not here as well?

Martin Luther addresses it, and I'll paraphrase: Are your sins real or symbolic? If you're a real sinner - which you are whether you believe it or not - then forgiveness needs to be real too. If you sin only symbolically then forgiveness needs only be symbolic too.

Perhaps here's an example. Families often get together to eat a meal at Thanksgiving. Undoubtedly there are people at that table that you are pleased to have there, and quite possibly there are some people there you wish weren't there. Let's say that it's Thanksgiving and your extended family is getting together for dinner. Your 20 year old niece, Clara, a lovely young woman; intelligent but maybe a little naïve, is coming with a new boyfriend named Frederick that she wants to

introduce to the family. Your whole family waits to meet this young gentlemen with eager anticipation. Except when she arrives with Frederick he turns out to be a 46 year old man, heavily covered in body art, and his teeth are yellowed from smoking. He has a felony conviction and several misdemeanors. Also, he unexpectedly has brought his young son with him because while the boy's mother was supposed to have custody of him for today, yesterday she was busted and jailed for drugs. He also says that his two other children aren't with him because they are to a different mother who to whom a court has granted sole custody, and he only has supervised visitation rights. He hasn't brought anything in the way of food to add to the meal, but he taps his pocket with a wink and says he's brought something fun for after the meal for anyone who's interested.

Now, quite likely your family will symbolically accept this guy in that you'll let him have a place at your table for the meal, but I doubt you'll really be accepting him in at all. It's going to be an awkward meal with a lot of forced politeness. And you can bet the moment he leaves the door the tension will break and people will start sharing their real shock, hoping with all hope that he doesn't become a permanent part of the family.

Symbolic acceptance or real acceptance? ...perhaps a parallel to symbolic forgiveness vs. real forgiveness.

Symbolic forgiveness is when we do the confession and forgiveness at the beginning of the service. We accept that we have sinned, even if we can't think of anything we've done wrong, and we hear words that God forgives us. I'm not knocking what we are doing there, but ultimately so what? It's just words.

What is real forgiveness? You are what you eat. Real forgiveness is when God says: I accept you as you are. I accept you so fully that I want to put a part of my very own presence into the fabric of your body. And I want to do it in a way that you can see and smell and touch and taste. In communion we take the body and blood of Christ so that we know God has chosen us to bear him into the world. That is real forgiveness.

Life isn't always fun. I'm sure you've experienced times where you felt rejected, humiliated, ashamed, or unaccepted. Perhaps you had it coming to you, maybe you did something stupid or wrong. Perhaps you didn't and your treatment was undeserved. Whatever the case, the presence of Christ in communion is God's genuine embrace - whether you deserve it or not.

The symbolic presence of Christ in the bread and wine just doesn't cut it. It reduces communion to a remembrance ritual. That is why the philosophical debate over the presence of Christ is more than just philosophical. It touches us in real ways.

How does Christ's body and blood come in the bread and wine? I can give you a very Lutheran answer: I don't know. It is a mystery that is known only to God and it can't be figured out or limited to human logic. But it is God's promised presence, and we trust in the truth of that promise.

May you live in a way that honors God's choice to embrace you and invest part of himself in you. And may you find the deep strength and delight of knowing you always have God's embrace. Amen