

Easter 4, Yr. B
April 22, 2018
First Communion sermon

Because Olive and Stella will be receiving communion for the first time today, I'm going to do something different in the sermon and, rather than tying it to the readings, talk about Eucharist. One can think about this preeminent sacrament in many different ways, perhaps looking at it like facets on a diamond. Talking about God and God's self-giving in all the sacraments, in all the creation, in fact, is to try to talk about something that will always be beyond us. It's to try to rationalize and define mystery. We won't ever be able to do that, but we can look at it and talk about it as best we can, knowing that the topic can never be exhausted and never be definitively nailed down. Even so, there ARE things we can say that can hopefully help us to understand the Eucharist and sacraments, in general, making our participation in them more meaning-filled and transformative.

As I said, this is a multi-faceted topic, so I'd like to begin first of all on a rather basic level. In Eucharist, in communion, Jesus comes to live in our hearts in a special way. One 5-year old, about to receive communion said, "I like to do that; it's like saying 'Hi' to Jesus." Another story from this age group that comes to mind is the story about the little one who was frightened by a thunder storm one night. Her mother came in to comfort her and, in an attempt to reassure her, said, "You don't have to be afraid; remember that Jesus is always with you." And the child's response was, "Yes, I know that, but sometimes it's nice to have a little skin." Eucharist is one way in which we get some "skin." And, while we're thinking about Olive and Stella, perhaps the best way to explain the Eucharist is that Jesus wants to come and be with you.

On another level, the church has seven named sacraments, but insofar as sacraments can point us to God, almost anything can function as a sacrament. You'll remember the definition: that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Because of the creation and the incarnation, we know that the material world is full of God's goodness and, because of that, it's possible to see God's presence everywhere. God is omnipresent, it's just that we have to come to that place where we recognize we're living in a sacramental universe, where things become so transparent that in and through them we know God's presence and action in our very midst. The goal, as one person said, is that everything cries out "God" to us. God is everywhere, but we need to grow in faith to be able to see that and, in the meantime, the sacraments assure us that in them, here and now, we encounter God.

A few weeks ago, on Maundy Thursday, we heard from one of Paul's letters about the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples. We heard how, at that meal, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body." And then he took the cup of wine, blessed it and said "this is the cup of my blood, which is poured out for you." We say these words each time we celebrate the Eucharist and then we add that Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." It helps to understand what was going on, I think, when we remember a couple of things. First of all, Jesus was Jewish and this kind of blessing and sharing of bread and wine was and is commonly done in Jewish homes. So, Jesus could have been doing that, or perhaps he was sharing the Passover meal with his disciples – that meal where Jewish

people remembered how they were saved from slavery when they put the blood of the lamb over their doors and ate unleavened bread as they were freed from Egypt.

Also embedded in the tradition of the Middle East is the idea that to share a meal with someone is to bind yourself to them forever. I remember my Hebrew professor, who had done some archeological work in the Middle East, talking about this. That it probably came from the fact that the desert was a dangerous place, often ruled over by one chieftain or another. If you wanted to cross his territory, you needed his permission as well as his protection and when that was granted, it would be sealed with a meal. But that meal wasn't just a matter of eating together, it was a sign, both of hospitality, but also of a cemented relationship. To eat together was to say – wherever you go, whatever you need, I am there for you. In our current society of fast food and casual lunch dates, when many lament that families no longer have time to sit and eat together, we risk losing the centrality of eating together. When we share food, we are not only sharing hospitality, but we're sharing something of ourselves and building up our relationships. The kind of radical hospitality that undergirds the Eucharist can get lost unless we consciously bring it to mind. When we eat this meal together, we are cementing our relationships, not only to God, but to one another. Wherever you go, whatever you need, I am here for you.

Over the centuries there have been many bitter arguments over the nature of the Eucharist and over what exactly is happening. This was one of the big issues at the time of the Reformation and, because the Anglican Church, as you will remember, is neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic, we kind of have a foot in both ponds, so to speak. So while the Catholics emphasized real presence in the doctrine of transubstantiation, most Protestants disagreed, some saying it was about consubstantiation and others emphasizing the words of remembrance. There's a spectrum here, with those on one end saying the Eucharist is purely symbolic and has no real effect on the one who receives and those on the other saying the opposite. I remember reading about one Anglican theologian in the 16th century, reviewing the various arguments and saying, quite simply, "Actually, we don't know how it happens, we simply trust and believe that somehow we encounter the living Christ in the Eucharist." A thought here about the word "remember" which is *anamnesis* in the Greek. It doesn't mean to remember, as in thinking about something in the distant past. Rather it means to re-live, to re-encounter. It's a word that carries the sense of being beyond time, or engaging in a way of looking at time so that past events become present with all their power.

And I think that must have been what Jesus wanted. You'll remember that he told his disciples that he had to leave them, but that he wouldn't leave them alone. He left them this sacrament of encounter, so that he could be present to them and to us. And using bread and wine, those basic things we need for life, meant that those common things could become sacred to us. And, just as we need the energy of food for our physical bodies to grow and flourish, so we need the energy of the Eucharist for our spirits to grow and to flourish.

Because ultimately, the Eucharist is for our growth and our transformation into Christ. As we receive the Eucharist and think about what we're doing, encountering the life of Christ, receiving his very life, his very holy spirit, we're receiving what we need to live as Christ lived. We are

Christ's agents in the world today, his hands and his feet, living and loving as he did and we need his life, his energy through his Holy Spirit to do so.

So, while there's certainly an individual dimension here, there's also a communal, even a cosmic dimension. Which is fitting on this Earth Day. Fr. Vincent Donovan, who was a missionary in Africa for many years, said this:

If any one sacrament stands for the whole of Christianity and the church, it is the Eucharist. It symbolizes fully what the Christian message is and what it means for the world. Indeed it points to the world and all creation. It speaks for all the Bible from the food of the tree of life in the garden to the messianic banquet at the end time; from the blood of goats and heifers of the Old Covenant to the blood of Christ in the New. It is the presence of God in the world. It is the cross and resurrection of Christ. It is the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation. It is salvation and the new creation. It is inexhaustible. It is shalom. It is the ultimate destination toward which all the religions of the world, with all their sacred symbols from the beginning of time, have been tending and striving. It is what the Jewish high priest and the American Indian shaman, the Hindu priest and the Teutons and the Celts and the African witch doctors have been trying to say. It is what Jesus Did say - ALL this...all of it, is my body." (*The Church in the Midst of Creation.*)

Two final thoughts. One is that the sacraments aren't magic. We need to come to them with an open heart and the intention of encountering God. There's a painting in St. Paul's in London that shows Jesus in a garden knocking on a door that has no outside handle. It has to be opened from the inside. Revelation has a verse applicable to that: Jesus says: I'm standing at the door knocking; If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you. I will eat with you and you with me. But we have to open the door.

Because we have the Eucharist available to us at least every Sunday, there's a danger that we'll become complacent or jaded, or even forgetful about what we're doing. There's a story about a Buddhist monk ask a Christian to explain the Eucharist. The Christian says, "Well, we go up and we take the bread and wine." "And then what do you do?" asks the Buddhist. "Well, "the Christian says, "We go and sit down." And the Buddhist's reply is something we all need to remember: "WHAT ? You received God into your very being and then you go and SIT DOWN?" The meaning of Eucharist is thanksgiving. Let's always remember that we've been given an awesome gift. Amen.