

16 August, 2009 (Proper 15B)  
I Kings 2:10-12, 3: 3-14; Ps 111  
Eph 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

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From time to time, I have an amazing conversation. A young person will walk into my office, or an older one will share a ride in a car, and will tell me the most astonishing story. He grew up in a country where there was endemic violence. Or she suffered years of abuse as a child. He became a refugee, wafting from country to country, trying to find a haven. She ran away, ended up on the streets or in foster care. He was ten before he learned to read. She had a child when she was still a child. He became a policeman. She is now a teacher. And the amazing thing is that they are good people, solid people, the kind of person you'd want your child to be. They are kind, and they are gentle with children, and they do honest work even when the pay isn't great. And they come to church and they want to serve their God, and I find myself wondering *where did it come from, this goodness?* If we are what we eat, these people should be mean and bitter and hard. But something more has been there, a resilience and a strength, something that kept their souls from permanent harm. The bread of their affliction somehow became the flesh and blood of Christ, and it bore fruit for glory.

This is the mystery that could not be understood by the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day.<sup>1</sup> Ancient Judaism revolved around a purity code, around the simple idea that what goes into a person's life is what comes out. Religion became a kind of algorithm by which divine law helped people to avoid bad things and add good ones, much as a new mother tries to protect her baby from germs by sterilizing bottles and wiping off pacifiers that fall on the floor. Foods were carefully regulated, and so were pots, which had to be cleaned. Certain fabrics were permitted; others were not. Dead animals were unclean, as were women at certain times in their cycles. If you ate what was not clean or touched what was not clean, you became unclean. Sacrifices and ritual baths allowed people to cleanse themselves if they had erred. It was all a way of being set apart for God, a system of cause-and-effect which allowed people access to God, who was thought of as being too pure and too powerful a presence for mortals to endure. Even the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies only on the Feast of Atonement, and even then they had to tie a rope around his ankle so that, if God struck him dead, the others could pull him out.

The problem with the system was that the math didn't work. Loving people, good people, would gently raise children who turned out to be brutes (they're all over Scripture!). Other people, who had endured horrible things, the kinds of things which should have corrupted them forever, became people of mercy and gentleness. Devout people who kept every line and stroke of the ritual law could still, if they chose, use that law to frighten others rather than to raise them up. They could avoid all the things that were nasty and still not prune their hearts.

And so Jesus spoke out in two places, saying hard truths which earned him enemies. He pointed out that the premise of the purity code was false: physical purity and spiritual purity are not the same thing. "Do you not see?" he challenged, "that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?"... And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." (Mark 7:18-23) It is not so easy to pinpoint the origin of evil. It does not come from what you touch or taste or smell. Like Medieval people who thought that maggots were spontaneously generated by bad meat, we have to accept that certain bad things appear in us without an obvious cause. We

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<sup>1</sup> It's not that easy for us to understand, either!

cannot keep ourselves safe, because we are people, and people are not safe. "The human mind and heart are a mystery." (Ps 64:7)

But the opposite is true as well, and that's what Jesus is saying when he speaks of his flesh and blood. This concept is, if anything, more offensive than the first. It's the idea that -- sometimes -- goodness will appear from nowhere, like buttercups in springtime. And Christ is speaking, not only of us, but of himself: a no-name, fatherless child from a poor family who nevertheless has revelation to offer. Christ says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." I am the one who has appeared as if from nowhere. I am the manna that sustains you in the wilderness of your lives, the bread which will keep your soul alive when there is nothing clean to eat because all around you is barren and bitter and dry. I am the rebuke to all those who look at you and say you can never amount to anything: you can.

It sounds wonderful and holy, as if he is teaching of wisdom and knowledge and understanding, but then he adds the stinging tail: "and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:51) And the Jews recoil in horror, as we would, because the one thing we do not ever eat is human flesh. When I lived in California, people talked a lot about the Donner party. They were a group of people who tried to move to California in 1846, but got trapped in the snows of the High Sierra. There were eighty-seven of them, and, they were trapped for months, long enough to run out of their supplies. To survive, they began to cannibalize the dead. The story has lingered because it is so pitiful: that well-meaning people, civilized people, people like us, could be so far reduced that they would do what is unthinkable. They tell the story over and over, as if to keep it away: *even though this has happened, such things just do not happen.* And yet, Christ said, "eat my flesh."

And said it again and again. "Very truly I tell you, 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, and I will raise them up on the last day, for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them...The one who eats of this bread will live forever." (John 6:53-56, 58) If you do not know what Christ is talking about, this is horrible. It was not until much later that Christ eases off, taking bread, blessing it, breaking it, and saying: "This is my body which is given for you." At that point, he allowed the church to proclaim sacrament rather than horror.

Medieval holy writings are peppered with incidents in which Jews or Moslems, entering a church during the Mass, are horrified to see the Christian worshipers devouring the flesh of a baby who is lying on the altar. The stories pointed to the two-fold mystery of the Eucharist: that the bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ, and that we, who participate by faith, do not have to see it. The unbelievers in the story still saw what was real (the presence of Christ), but they were not given grace to perceive the bread and wine. The appearance of ordinariness is the illusion, the presence of the sacred so real that it cannot be taken away.

The stories are strange, and yet they say a real thing. There are no ordinary people. Within the most average person you will ever meet is the living image of God, but only sometimes do we have eyes to see it. In the simplicity of bread and wine, we meet that unexplained goodness which resists all the forces of degradation, those from within as well as those from without, and shapes our hearts for life. I would call it *grace* -- the unearned blessing, the ray of sunlight in a dark time, the bread one hungry person gives to another, so that the other might live.

But although evil sometimes appears as if from nowhere, if grace has no apparent cause, we are still not helpless in how we respond to their presence. The very reason Christ gives us sacraments is so that we have a way to choose to nurture what will give us life. Freud said we live between *eros* and *thanatos*, between those things in ourselves which draw us toward life, and those which lead us and those around us into death. When we come to the altar and kneel or stand with our hands outstretched, we practice coming to God in openness, to receive goodness, so that we can

learn to come to one another in the same pose. We abandon the pretense of our sufficiency, and we admit that we need the help of another to be made whole. And yet, the bread and the wine were prayed over by all of us: it was our presence as a gathered community of faith that drew Christ down.<sup>2</sup> The Eucharist is a gift Christ has given us, and which we have given one another, just like our lives.

A Cherokee elder was once teaching a young boy about life. He said, “A fight is going on inside me, a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego. The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.” The boy thought about it for a minute and then asked the elder, “Which wolf will win?” The old chief replied, “The one you feed.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in the Episcopal Church (unlike the Roman Catholic one) a priest is not allowed to celebrate or receive Communion if nobody else is present. The sacrament is not a private conversation between God and the priest, but is given for the whole people of God.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional Cherokee wisdom story.