

Homily – All Are Welcomed at This Table

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This is our fifth and last Sunday in which the Gospel reading is about bread. Five weeks ago, I ended that bread sermon by sharing the Iona Abbey invitation to the eucharist. The Iona Abbey is a sacred place at the northern tip of Scotland. Throughout the centuries the Iona Abbey has had some very holy people who have been able to help others on their own spiritual journeys, and I think their invitation to the Eucharist is pretty special. Here it is again.

“The table of bread and wine is now to be made ready. It is the table of company of Jesus, and all who love him. It is the table of sharing with the poor of the world, with whom Jesus identified himself. It is the table of communion with the earth, in which Christ became incarnate. So come to this table, you who have much faith and you who would like to have more; you who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time; you who have tried to follow Jesus, and you who have failed; come. It is Christ who invites us to meet him here.”

The eucharist with the bread and the wine is at the center of our worship here at St. Barnabas, and this is true of all churches in the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement. Other branches of the Jesus movement have music or the sermon at the center, and some of us have spent time in those other traditions. But, here all of our worship of God leads into the Eucharist.

Now, here is my way to tell the story of the Eucharist. From before the beginning of time, the first emanation from God was the Christ, the perfect union of spirit and matter. And with the Big Bang, the Christ, this perfect union of spirit and matter is throughout all of time and space. As human beings we were made in the image of God, and we are the imperfect union of spirit and matter who is enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

Two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready for it, Christ was born anew into this world as a baby boy that we call Jesus. And,

he grew up into a wise man who shared the knowledge and love of God with those around him. Sometimes sharing God's love meant confronting the powers of the day that had nothing to do with God, so that eventually those powers crucified Jesus on the Cross. Though he was the perfect union of God and human, Jesus suffered pain and rejection. He experienced some of the worst that human beings can do to one another, but as we know the story did not end there, for on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. Two thousand years ago, the perfect union of God and human suffered and died, but was resurrected from the dead, and instead of punishing those that had caused him so much pain, he ended the cycle of violence. Jesus forgave those who killed him. And the life, death and resurrection of Jesus changed the universe forever. Somehow, in ways that we don't fully understand, he made eternal life available to each and every one of us. From the beginning of time God planned to have Christ come into the world as Jesus so that we might each move further into the union of spirit and matter for which we were created by God. This is the good news of Jesus that we are called to share with the world, and this is the good news that we remember each time we share the Eucharist with one another.

Before he died, Jesus was at table with his followers and he shared bread and wine with them. Jesus took the common elements of bread and wine and he made the common holy. Jesus called us to mimic his actions so that we too can have the bread as his body and wine as his blood. The Eucharist is a living mime, done first by Jesus and slowly, ever so slowly, also imitated by us.

Now, the Eucharist is more than an intellectual exercise for it includes things that are beyond the understanding of our minds. It includes things that can perhaps be better understood by our bodies. The participatory act of speaking and listening, the movement of hands and bodies, the taste of bread and then of wine all come into play. Week in and week out, we take the body and blood of Jesus into our mouths and into our bodies.

In this way we move our knowing to the bodily, cellular, participative, and unitive level. We keep eating and drinking the Mystery until one day it

dawns on us, in an undefended moment, “My God, I really am what I eat!” I am also the union of spirit and matter, and even though I did not know it I have been and continue to be the Body of Christ.

Now, this morning there is one last point I want to make about the Eucharist. Sometimes we forget that Jesus didn’t want his community to have a social ethic; he wanted his followers to be a social ethic. Our very way of eating and organizing ourselves is to be an affront to the system of dominance and power. We are to live in a new symbolic universe, especially symbolized by what we now call open table fellowship.

And here is why this is important. In Jesus’ time, the dominant institution was the kinship system: the family, the private home. ... What happened around the tables in those houses shaped and named the social order. Table friendship ends up defining how we see friendship in general. From the beginning, Eucharistic table fellowship was meant to include people of all strata and demographic. It included men and women, rich and poor, master and slave. Jesus was always pushing the boundary of who was included and this was especially true at the table. In all cultures, sharing food is a complex interaction that symbolizes social relationships and defines social boundaries almost more than any other daily event. Whom you eat with defines whom you don’t eat with. Through our choices and behavior at table, we name and identify ourselves.

As Christianity developed, the Church moved from Jesus’ meal with open table fellowship to the relatively safe ritual meal we call the Eucharist. Unfortunately, that ritual itself came to redefine social reality in a negative way, in terms of worthiness and unworthiness—the opposite of Jesus’ intention. Even if we deny it the practical message most people hear today is that the Eucharist defines who is in the club and who is outside it.

However, here at St. Barnabas we practice open table fellowship, which means all are invited to participate in the bread and the wine. You don’t need to be baptized, and you don’t even need to be Christian, though it helps to have a sense of wonder about the mystery that is the Eucharist and the good news of Jesus.

Historically, it was expected that one would publicly profess an embrace of Jesus before one would participate in the Eucharist. However, these days, we recognize that the embodied act of taking the bread and wine may lead someone to embrace Jesus for the first time and the good news he has for all. Again, we are what we eat. As we consume the perfect union of spirit and matter we move ever so slowly into union with God.

In the Eucharist, we slowly learn how to surrender to the Presence in one place, in one thing, in one focused moment. The priest holds up the bread and wine and says, “See it here, believe it here, get it here, trust it here.” Many Christians say they believe in the Presence in the Eucharist, but they don’t get that that same presence is everywhere—which is the whole point! They don’t seem to know how to recognize the Presence of God when they leave the church, when they meet people who are of a different religion, race, sexual orientation, or nationality. They cannot also trust that every person is created in the image of God. Jesus spent a lot of his earthly ministry trying to break down the false distinctions between “God’s here” and “God’s not there.” He dared to see God everywhere, even in sinners, in enemies, in failures, and in outsiders. Usually, early stage religion is not yet capable of that, but fortunately God is patient with all of us and with history itself. So, through the Eucharist we re-embrace the good news of Jesus that is there for all.

And, I have to say that one of the things that impresses me about the Anglican Communion, our worldwide denomination, is that even when we have strong disagreement with one another about issues of gender and sexuality, even through ferocious disagreement, we stay at table with one another. We continue to share bread with one another. In this way we model bridgebuilding in our society that has become so red and blue and purple. Over the last ten minutes I hope you have internalized how incredibly important it is to be at the table with one another.

I began this sermon with the invitation to the Eucharist from Iona Abby. And let me end this sermon by adding my own invitation. Here at St. Barnabas all are welcomed to participate in taking the bread and the wine.

No matter where you are in your spiritual journey, you are welcomed. And it would not be an open invitation, if I did not also say “if you don’t want to take the bread and wine, then that is OK too. An open invitation is at your option. No matter what you do, you are the beloved of God, and you are welcomed here.”