

From John's Gospel: The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" And Jesus said to them, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

I am so happy to be with you for Corpus Christi! I have celebrated Corpus Christi before, though this is my first opportunity to preach, which means I had to learn a bit about this occasion, more than I already knew, in order to inform what I would say. And as I studied, one thing became apparent to me. It seems that Corpus Christi gives us an opportunity beyond Maundy Thursday and Holy Week to give thanks for the Last Supper, for the gift Christ passed on to us the night before he died. And to give thanks for his blessed passion and precious death, and of course for his rising to life again.

Those are all hallmarks of the Triduum, of course, but it occurs to me that this evening offers us a place to carry with us into Ordinary time the gifts and prayers and enduring legacies of Holy Week and Easter. To ponder them anew. My references tonight to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are intentional in that way.

But let me begin somewhere different, in France. My family made a visit to St. Alban's Church in Strasbourg. A German friend of ours, Gunter, had ventured across the Rhein to be there with us. St. Alban's building itself was beautiful, austere but quite lovely, with stacks and stacks of English prayer books. The liturgy was almost the same as what you and I know. The congregation was quite diverse, with Africans, Indians, an assortment of Europeans, Americans, and Asians, so much that I was moved by this beautiful mixture of races and people.

When the bread and wine had been consecrated with words belonging to Christ himself, we all went down to make a giant circle around the altar. As my wife and I stood waiting to receive, I noticed that our friend was still sitting in the nave, waiting quietly for us to finish and return.

I didn't want to make an issue out of it, because I know that matters of faith are extremely personal. But I did wonder why he didn't want to receive Communion there, that day. He was familiar enough with the Episcopal

Church to know what to expect. And his own faith and piety amazes me constantly. So later I was surprised when he told me. “It’s all that talk of eating flesh and drinking blood. And all those strangers drinking out of one cup. It just seems too close and personal to me, and unhygienic!— especially with strangers.”

Well, without trying, I think he taught me something. Sometimes religious types look at our Gospel lesson for today and delight in Jesus’ words, how he is with us in the Sacrament he instituted, how his body and blood give life to the world. But we would also do well to remember that something about it is really quite provocative. Sometimes it is a little too close and personal. And unhygienic! But I would submit to you, that is exactly as Christ intended. Sometimes there is great blessing in appreciating the blessed disrepute.

John’s gospel tells us that we would not be the first to notice the disquietude. In fact, he tells us that this talk of Jesus as the bread who came down from heaven, of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, was too much for

that crowd who first heard his words. He called himself the new manna, the bread of heaven, and he went on to tell them to drink his blood. Manna in the desert had once saved the lives of the hungry Israelites. Jews considered blood to be the ultimate sign of life. It is simple enough to understand: as blood seeps from a wound, life slips away. The Hebrew Scriptures taught them first to drain the blood from any meat before eating it. He meant all of this as a sign of life, but that isn’t how they heard it. John suggests that the double meaning was lost on the crowd.

Yet I think this much is plain. It was not lost on St. John as he penned this story. He delighted in double meaning, perhaps himself seeing beyond the outward and visible sign to the unseen, spiritual grace of this story, and he preserved that for us. Despite the complexity it might cause, he meant for us to recognize in it a sign of life.

There is something else unique about John’s gospel, besides his love of saying two things with one story, and that is how this story comes earlier in his gospel than

perhaps it should. John's talk of Jesus as the bread of life doesn't come in the end of his gospel. The others, you remember, all narrate the institution of the Eucharist in an upper room in Jerusalem, just before his death.

In their chronicles, we see a private event with Jesus and his friends gathered to share that Last Supper. It is an ordered moment of solace and joy within a larger narrative of volatility and outrage. Despite what will come, for a moment there is peace. Jesus sits with his friends, sharing a Passover meal whose script is as predictable as our own Eucharistic prayers. Despite the tragedy of his death, for a moment it was lovely. I suspect we imitate that in all of our holy remembrances.

But that isn't how or where John remembers the story. You see, otherwise, the lessons are the same. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," rests nicely with what Paul writes, that he passes on to us what he received, how the Lord Jesus took the bread and wine. And when we imagine all of these words being spoken in the upper room with Peter and James

and John and all the Marys and, yes, even with Judas, it doesn't suggest what John's story does. But that is why, I think, John set the narrative out in public, on a hillside next to a lake with a fickle and unpredictable crowd of strangers. His was a story not meant just for Maundy Thursday, we might say, but for times more ordinary. That is where John saw the real miracle. Not that Jesus would be present with us only in upper rooms and churches full of friends, but everywhere and at every time and every place. And sometimes it is rather close and personal and unhygienic! It is as Christ intended it to be.

On Good Friday years ago, I went to a church where I didn't know most of the people. It was an urban church, like yours here, which meant it gathered an *assortment of humanity* on Good Friday. In the liturgy, there comes a collect that we pray each year, but one that struck me differently that day, among people I didn't know.

"Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and

to suffer death upon the cross.“ I opened my eyes a little bit and looked around, and in genuine surprise I saw others looking around, and looking at me. *You!?* They must have thought. It was all of us, this unpredictable assortment of humanity, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to give himself, so we might have life.

I remember another Sunday, years ago, when I was at All Saints' in Atlanta. It is diverse in its own way, with a cross-section of people. At any given point, you might find yourself sitting next to Coca-Cola executives, *Buckhead Bettys*, college students, as well as the homeless. That particular day I sat behind a woman, a woman I presumed to be homeless. A miasma of her destitute life hovered around her, so most kept their distance. Passing the peace was an effort. All Saints always handled this well, but it was simply too unpleasant to come close that day.

And then it was time for communion. We heard again those familiar words of Jesus: this is my body and this is my blood. And then we were welcomed to the altar to

meet Christ. That was when I realized that, despite the space left around her in the pews, I would be behind this woman at the altar rail.

Usually I would pray as I walked forward, as I hope you do. I wish I could tell you that I prayed some beautiful prayer that day, but I didn't. I just hoped that she was going down for a blessing. I prayed that she would just intinct! But she didn't. She leaned forward and slurped out the wine with every fiber of her being. And then an older and elegant woman, the Eucharistic minister, held the same chalice in front of me, and with earnestness declared, “this is the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.”

“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they asked. Most say it started in an upper room with friends who gathered to eat and drink of his life. John says it started out in the open, where we gather, susceptible to all the unpredictability and blessed disrepute this sacrament offers, just as Christ must have intended it to be.

So I drank. Like her, I am a sipper and not a dipper. Like her, I am a gulper, really! I always drink, and not drinking that day would mean something I couldn't say. So I slurped the wine with her, and I realized how much she and I had in common. I made the sign of the cross, and went on, never to see her again.

My friend Gunter was right. Sometimes it is closer and more personal than we would like. But in that there is enduring blessing, on many levels—both in the orderly remembrance and in the blessed disrepute. Those who eat his flesh and drink his blood, he abides in them, and they in him.

Let us pray. Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.