

Body & Blood

Last week, a number of you got to meet my friend Steven Greenebaum. Rev. Greenebaum is the pastor of Living Interfaith Church, a congregation that is moving into our building for their services every other Saturday morning starting in September. As he has written for their website, “Interfaith is a faith that embraces the teachings of all spiritual paths that lead us to seek a life of compassionate action. Interfaith, as a faith, does not seek to discover which religion or spiritual path is “right.” Rather, it recognizes that we are all brothers and sisters, and that at different times and different places we have encountered the sacred differently. Interfaith celebrates our differing spiritual paths, recognizing it is our actions in this world that count; that we are called to engage the world, and to do so with compassion and with love.”

Over the last few years, Steven and I have nurtured a warm friendship as well as a mutually supportive collegiality. We walk the mall together four days a week and our conversations as we walk range from family matters to music and movies, from the joys and sorrows of pastoral life to what some would find fairly esoteric points of theology. Although his own tradition, as he would put it, is Jewish, as you might suspect Steven is well-versed in the theologies of all three of the Abrahamic faiths and many others. A few weeks ago, our conversation turned to the topic of the Christian tradition of Communion, the Eucharist or “Lord’s Supper.” He shared with me a theory that he’d developed some years ago (Steven has lots of theories) and that I’ve been mulling over a good deal since he shared it. Today seemed to me to be an excellent opportunity to share with you my own ruminations on the matter.

The majority of you, I suspect, are wondering why this Sunday presents itself to me as a good time to talk about Communion. It’s not, after all, the first Sunday of the month, when like most good American Baptists we distribute the elements of bread and grape juice in the style that most of us have known since childhood. But if you grew up Catholic or in some Anglican and Lutheran traditions, you may retain the glimmering of memory that this third Sunday in Pentecost is celebrated as the Feast of Corpus Christi or the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. The feast day was developed and came into general usage in the last half of the Twelfth Century and the early years of the Thirteenth. It sprang from a desire of some Christians to have a time when the institution of the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist could be celebrated with joy. There was already, of course, a commemoration of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday but, as Francis Mershman points out in his article in the Catholic Encyclopedia, “This day, however, was in Holy Week, a season of sadness, during which the minds of the faithful are expected to be occupied with thoughts of the Lord’s Passion.” And so, in 1264, Pope Urban IV, at the instigation of a Belgian nun called Juliana of Mont Cornillon, directed that the Feast of Corpus Christi be observed throughout Christendom and had Thomas Aquinas write a liturgy for the special day. “This Office,” Mershman notes, “is one of the most beautiful in the Roman Breviary and has been admired *even by Protestants.*”

While I appreciate Mershman’s ecumenical enthusiasm, I must confess a complete and utter ignorance as to the work of Aquinas as regards Corpus Christi. And this, it seems to me, points out the great irony of this feast and indeed of the observance of the Lord’s Supper in general. The act of sharing in bread and wine, the act possibly meant by Jesus and certainly by the early Church to be the great symbol of the unity of those who put their faith in Christ, has become and remained instead the point of greatest contention and division between Christians of various traditions. Although we may appreciate the way in which the bread and cup represent the

Body & Blood

spiritual communion among Christians around the world and throughout the ages, the physical reality is that there are still a majority of churches where communion is a closed affair, whether to the members of that local body, that denomination, or some other subset. I could tell story after story this morning of the pain felt by friends, family members, and cherished colleagues who in good conscience simply cannot share together in this blessing from the Lord.

I will not belabor this point this morning or dwell on it other than to say that I have been a believer in the concept of the open table for many years and am glad that it is a tradition long established for this congregation. But I do think I have sound Biblical reason for thinking this way and the lessons I wish to draw from our Scripture readings this morning do indeed relate to this question as well as to the insights Rev. Greenebaum has shared with me. We Baptists are devoted to the idea of the bread and the cup as commemoration of Jesus' sacrifice and as symbolic of his body and his blood. But we don't take enough time to unpack those symbols to get at the deeper meanings of that one-to-one correspondence and I wish to rectify that to some extent this morning.

One fruitful area for investigation comes from the words of Jesus recorded in John 6:58. John does not tell the story of the institution of the Lord's Supper in the same way as it is done in the Synoptic Gospels. He makes only oblique reference to it in his rendering of Jesus' last meal with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. Instead, John gives us these references to the ceremony of bread and wine in this earlier teaching of Jesus following his feeding of the five thousand when he describes himself as the bread of life. He is, he says, "the living bread that came down from heaven... (but) not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died." Jesus is here referring to the manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness by God and, given the complexity of the writing of the Gospel According to John, that should make us wonder what lessons we can find there.

Like the Eucharistic story in the reading from John, the reference to manna in the reading from Deuteronomy is not the whole story we are used to (that comes in Exodus 16 and Numbers 11) but more of a recap and analysis, a little bit like the difference between watching the day's sports highlights on SportsCenter or listening to Keith Olbermann riff on them in his "Big Show." The manna was sent, says Moses, "in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." In naming himself the Bread of Life, then, and comparing himself to manna, Jesus is also indirectly associating himself with the Word of the Lord, a title claimed for him in John's prologue. Jesus, as Bread of Life, continually points back to the Father in both word and deed. It is this tangle of associations which leads us to refer also to the Scriptures, the Word of God in written form, as the Bread of Life, as we did in our earlier hymn.

The Deuteronomic review tells us that manna carried another lesson as well. Moses says to the Israelites, "do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery... and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good." Manna may have been sweet to the taste but the fact that it had to be gathered every day and could not be stored overnight meant that the ones who relied on it were constantly aware of their precarious circumstances and of their absolute dependence on God. There is another old hymn

Body & Blood

that starts, “’Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,” but for independent Americans of the 21st century, that sort of dependence can stick in the craw. We need reminders, often, that we are not nearly as self-sufficient as we would like to think. We may not depend on God in such an obvious way for our daily bread but anyone who has experienced the sudden loss of a job or catastrophic illness or other trauma gets in touch pretty quickly with our need for God’s sustaining love in our lives.

I’ll come back to this Old Testament theme of humility before God as it plays itself out in Jesus’ teaching in a moment. First, let’s look at the broader Eucharistic concept in the Johannine passage. In the nearly two millennia since Jesus directed his disciples to “eat his body,” we’ve grown pretty comfortable with the metaphor but it’s good to remember that many of those who heard him were scandalized at this hint of cannibalism. Nowadays, we use the phrase, “you are what you eat,” to reflect the truth that we are profoundly affected by what we take it, whether that is sustenance or ideas. The shorthand of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ as a way to express our need to absorb the ideas and outlook of Jesus until they become our own makes intrinsic sense to us. That is the surface lesson of this passage in John 6.

At another level, we have Jesus commending to us a particular tenet of his life – his absolute reliance in, faith in, and obedience to his Father. When Jesus says that the bread of his life is more effective than the manna of the wandering Hebrews, he is saying in part that those who truly adopt his life as their own will remember to stay humble before God, just as he has done. They will, to retranslate the Greek, “live the life of the age,” that is, the messianic age which he has come to inaugurate. They will live, as God has promised, with the laws of God written on their hearts, loving God and neighbor, seeking peace and well-being in all that they do.

This is where the ideas suggested to me by Steven Greenebaum come into play. Some of Steven’s family were quite disappointed that he did not become a rabbi, like his cousin. But that is still the background he brings to his interfaith work and he is quick to see the Jewishness of Jesus as revealed in his words and deeds and he has an excellent facility for explaining the subtleties to the *goyim* (not that my gentle friend would ever put it that way). Steven sees the symbols of the Lord’s Table deepened and strengthened in the even more ancient symbols of the Passover meal, the *Seder*.

In an essay he shared with me, Rev. Greenebaum draws the connections between Jesus’ use of the bread and wine at *Seder* and Jewish teaching about the meaning of those same elements. At roughly the time of Christ, the great Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria gave four allegorical interpretations for the matzo used in the Passover meal. Among these, he included the ideas “that it is the bread of affliction (and that great tasks call for great sacrifice); and... that it is a warning to turn away from arrogance.” A modern Jewish scholar cited by Greenebaum, Joseph Stallings, “notes as well that matzo is traditionally referred to as “the bread of affliction.” But “In Deuteronomy, the Passover matzah is called ‘the bread of poverty.’”

Both through his reference to manna, as recorded in John, and his use of and identification with matzo, as recorded in the Synoptics, Jesus is proclaiming his humility before the Father and his solidarity with the poor and oppressed of the world and he is charging us to take on these attributes as our own. Whenever we lift to our lips the morsel of bread on the first Sunday of the

Body & Blood

month, indeed, whenever we enjoy “our daily bread,” whatever our meal may be, we should remember that although it may have been earned by the sweat of our brow, we owe our very existence as well as our capability to earn to the God who crafted us “fearfully and wonderfully made,” “just a little lower than God.” When we remember our own complete dependence on God, it is far easier for us to see our connection with our fellow human beings and especially with the frightened, hurrying refugees whose flight from Pharaoh’s coming wrath was remembered in every Passover and should, therefore, be remembered at our every celebration of Communion and every time that the bread is metaphorically broken.

But, as my good friend Steven reminded me, there is a flip side to the humility and poverty of the bread found in the wine. Wine is a fairly universal symbol of the joy of life and this is an attitude encouraged by the Bible, for example in Psalm 104:15, “Wine causes the heart of men to rejoice.” The Talmud records a tradition that is likely far older than Jesus that wine had become an integral part of the Passover experience, not because it was called for in Torah but because it reflected the hope and joy that the Hebrew refugees had found through their harrowing experience. If Jesus’ body is his humble life before God, then his blood, his life force, is his joy in living that life. This is the other part of the Christ event that we are to take into ourselves and make an integral part of our lives.

It is this deep imagery in the institution of Communion that has caused me to often make the connection between this holy meal and the promise of the Wedding Banquet which God has prepared for us. Sometimes we talk about that banquet as our reward in heaven and that is quite appropriate. It is our understanding of eternal life. But we should also remember that we can interpret that phrase, as we find it in John 6, for example, as the life which belongs to the Messianic Age and the Messianic Age has already been inaugurated in the Resurrection of Jesus. We are called, in other words, to live as if we were already at the banquet – grateful to our host, helping to invite in our sisters and brothers, especially those who need a good meal, and rejoicing in the love that characterizes the day. As Rev. Greenebaum writes, “These allegorical symbols of the work and life of Jesus illuminate his ministry to the marginalized, the hungry, the homeless, the rejected. But it is not a ministry of gloom, of a sullen, magisterial duty. Rather it is a ministry of joy. It is a ministry of hope. ... we should not neglect the wine. Jesus is telling us this is our joyful duty, not our mournful obligation.”

Steven Greenebaum is not the only one of my clergy friends to bless me with insights into the Scriptures. I meet weekly with a small group to discuss the lectionary verses for the upcoming Sunday. You know at least one of them: Susanne Kromberg, who is the director of spiritual care at Swedish Edmonds Hospital and who spoke to our Adult Sunday School a few months ago on her Quaker tradition. This past week, Susanne commended to my attention the paraphrase of Eugene Peterson’s “The Message” for our passage in John. It reads, in part, “Only insofar as you eat and drink flesh and blood, the flesh and blood of the Son of Man, do you have life within you. The one who brings a hearty appetite to this eating and drinking has eternal life and will be fit and ready for the Final Day.”

My friends, we should bring a hearty appetite to the eating and drinking of the life of Christ. God has provided for us this true bread and wine, the ineffable combination of humility and joy. The life-force as well as the lessons of Jesus can empower us to do, as he promised, miracles

Body & Blood

greater than his own. It has become a widely accepted truth that we can feed not just five thousand but the whole world if only we have the will. We can soar into the heavens, away from our own planet, cure all disease, end all war. All of these things we can do, if only we can learn to walk humbly with God and to enjoy God forever, to love God and to love our neighbors. May these lessons fill our eyes and our ears and our bellies and our brains every time we break bread, every time we raise a cup. May we, the Body of Christ, learn what it truly is to take into ourselves the body and the blood of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.