

If our reading from today's Gospel were shown on a premium channel on television, it would have to contain several warnings, among them: "For mature audiences," and "contains material unsuitable for children" and "contains graphic images." And these would be rather tame warnings, because if we were honest, the metaphors contained in today's Gospel are just plain gross and disgusting. They are upsetting images, they are repellant, and they are repugnant. Even for Jesus, who seems to be always pushing the envelope with those in authority, "eating flesh" and "drinking blood" is beyond way over the top. If you'll pardon the pun, this is hard to swallow.

It has to make one wonder whether the shock value is part of the point. Is the Gospel writer wanting to stop us in our tracks and make us really think about the implications of Jesus life and ministry as well as our relationship with him? What does John want us to understand about Jesus being the bread of life? Are we to try and digest the paradox that John's poetical gospel offers with the "Word becoming flesh" and the giving of that same flesh for the sake of the whole world? Is this more than an intellectual exercise? After all, Jesus is the very incarnation of God and we are invited to take all of Jesus into ourselves, into our very bodies. Surely

the answers to these questions can be answered, “yes, certainly.” And “yes, certainly” the body and blood metaphor points to our ritual of the Holy Eucharist and provides a context for our understanding of the meaning of that ritual.

One one level, we have to eat and drink in order to survive, to live and even to thrive. At the metaphorical level, Jesus telling us that feeding on Him is essential to our very survival. More than merely emulating Jesus, John wants us to embody Jesus - to contain and express Jesus with every fiber of our physical being. And if I understand the various commentaries I consulted correctly, we are to relish this and savor it.

I think this must be akin to being so absorbed by something we truly enjoy, that we have no sense of time or even of the world about us. We are so fully in the moment and enjoying whatever it is we are doing that we are consumed by the activity even as we consume the activity. Jesus gave himself on the cross for the whole world, so it appears that his intention is to have all of us, body and soul and he wants us to have all of him.¹ We are being invited into a deeply intimate relationship with our Lord, a relationship that is eternal for those of us in the body of Christ. If we are at

¹ William H. Willimon, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 361.

once consuming and being consumed by Jesus, then we are also “not of this world” but are fully present to our participation in God’s world. Yet ironically, at the same time we are called to interact this world as it is. How are we equipped to do both at once? At the risk of sounding a little glib, we do it in part by coming to the table behind me and taking part in our ritual meal. We pay attention to Christ’s presence among us. We integrate the experience of being fed by Christ and being filled up by Christ. We open ourselves up to a mystical experience in an encounter with the divine. We allow that encounter to shape and form us and we so relish the encounter that we have to share it with others.

Paul gets at this in this brief passage in Ephesians. He is urging us to do what some new age types call being mindful. He is telling us to be aware, be purposeful, be present in the moment. If we are fully integrating Christ into our very being, then we find ourselves thankful for God’s extravagant love for us, for his desire to be in deep, intimate relationship with us. We are so thankful we cannot keep from singing. He also warns us away from those things that are numbing agents, they keep us away from our true calling as disciples of Christ. We are certainly aware of evil in the world yet in the paraphrased words of Jimmy Carter, our faith demands

that we do whatever we can, wherever we are, whenever we can, for as long as we can with whatever we have to try and make a difference. Our faith is a balance contemplation and of action and it is a faith firmly rooted in God's vision for all of humanity.² The right balance of contemplation and action gives us the desire, the strength and the energy to carry out our mission as disciples of Christ.

So when you come to the rail in a few minutes to participate in communion, I hope you come with anticipation and joy, with a willingness to be totally filled with Christ and encounter the divine. And may this encounter be transforming, such that each of us can be a part of Christ's body in the world, living out Ascension's special charism to our neighbors and our tiny part of God's kingdom.

Amen.

² Richard Ward, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year B Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 353.