

The Fraction

Fr. Dr. Jon Goman

July 6, 2006

Second Sunday after Epiphany, Cycle B, John 1:43-51

Now, we have moved through the Eucharist as far as The Fraction, that is, the gesture of breaking the bread and holding it up so that you may know its brokenness. This is one of the original four actions of the Eucharist. The Offering is the first, the taking of the bread and wine from the back of the church and the placing of it on the altar. During the second, I bless the bread and the wine, that is I set it aside for the special purpose of carrying God's life into our lives. Then the bread is broken, that's The Fraction, that's the third action. The fourth is to eat the broken bread and drink from the shared cup.

So we have here a great circle, in which your gift comes back to you, changed. Why would this action of breaking the bread be important? Well, for most symbols which, like dance, are gestures, physical motions, multiple understandings are possible. I have people in some of my classes – in fact I'm about to engage in what I suspect will be a lengthy but futile discussion with one – who want to know whether I think the Bible accurate or not. And I responded, "What do you mean by accurate? Why is this word important to you?" But scripture and our use of scripture are not intended to constrict to a single meaning, but to be rich in multiple and layered meanings. If scripture and our interpretation of it is to be rich enough to give meaning to our lives it must mean more than a single thing. There's no one sitting in this room whose life means just one thing. So, if scripture is to be adequate to human life, to the gift that God has given us, I'm firmly convinced that it must mean many things at once. Otherwise, God is narrow minded. And even scripture can not make me entertain that possibility. Nothing is more fatal to religious knowledge than to insist upon one and only one meaning, be it of scripture, of liturgy, of prayer, of theological concept. For the religious vision, reality is interlocking layers, not disarticulated bits.

So, in talking about The Fraction, I want to talk about it in two ways. The first is the understanding the early church gave it. There's a hand-out on the back shelf which talks about the early church's understanding of The Fraction and gives a few references. Take it home if you'd like more information on the early church's perspective. The early church saw The Fraction as symbol of its unity. Now that's peculiar, because how could dividing something in half be a symbol of oneness? We have to struggle a bit with this. The evidence is overwhelming, the early church saw the breaking of the bread as a symbol of

the church's unity. The symbol developed in two ways. First, the church was sensitive to the fact that bread is a coming together of many separate things. There is an ancient hymn (Hymnal 1982, #302), probably part of a eucharistic prayer from about 110 AD, which says that as this bread which we bless was once scattered on the mountains in the form of separate pieces of grain and in the bread the grain is made one, so the church is one thing which is made of the scattered separateness of all her members. So the Eucharist is the coming together of the scattered into the one, just as the bread that is broken is the coming together of the scattered into the one. So that's how they started to think about it.

But if the church is going to remain one we have to acknowledge our differences, our separateness, even our conflict. There you see, the oneness has to be acknowledged as broken but it is still the one bread which is broken. That's why in the early church, and to this day in Eastern Orthodoxy, and here at St. Anselm's also, we use a single loaf or slice of bread and the piece which is given to each one of you is taken from the original unity, the one piece of bread. And that of God which comes to you comes not separately from God to you, but out of the oneness of the body of Christ, out of the oneness of the church. So that's that piece of symbolism, and that's how the early church understood The Fraction, the breaking of the bread: as a symbol of unity because through the breaking of a single piece of bread a portion of the oneness is given to everyone. In the early church, every town had its own bishop – one bishop, one Christian community, one Sunday Eucharist, one body of Christ. As soon as Christianity got popular not everyone could fit in one building so they began building suburban churches. Does this sound familiar? Now they really did call them sub-urban churches, churches outside the walls of the city. But growth made the original symbolism of unity hard to maintain. So the bishop would consecrate the one loaf of bread at his central church, in the city, then he would send messengers out to the suburban churches each with a small piece of the bishop's one consecrated loaf, which was then dropped into the chalice at the suburban church. So a piece of the one consecrated bread of the Christian church in that human place, in that city, would be present in all Sunday Eucharists in that human place. Through the presence of a fragment of the one loaf consecrated by the bishop the individual congregations were reminded of their unity as the body of Christ.

That, by the way, is the origin of the rather old fashioned custom of dropping a piece of the consecrated bread into the chalice. Now you may have heard different explanations of it, but historically that's where it came from.

I don't do that here because, for most people, that particular symbolism for the unity of the church is as dead as a doornail. And dead symbols aren't helpful unless you can make them live again.

So that's the first way of getting at what The Fraction is about. I think it an important insight.

There is another way The Fraction can be understood. If we are going to be one with each other, if the oneness of the church is to be something more than a hope for that which is not real, and, therefore, probably a vain hope, a floating

never-never-land pipe dream, then we have to have some way of dealing with all the brokenness and conflict which we bring here out of our lives. We must deal even with the brokenness and conflict generated here within the church. If you have ever run into a church which refuses to acknowledge that it generates brokenness and conflict in people, my suggestion is that you run the other way. Better no church at all than one which refuses to recognize its capacity for evil. And so in The Fraction, the bread which we have given, our lives, our history during the past week, the brokenness of what we offer, is recognized. It is broken as God accepts it and prepares to return it to us. The blessing of God, the consecration of the bread and wine, does not prevent or do away with brokenness. There is no completeness, no fullness, no wholeness in us. That's what the line in the old fashioned way of saying the Confession meant: "There is no wholeness in us." It doesn't mean that we are bad or horrible people, but that we are tragically incomplete, that as we are called to glory we are all short of our goal and calling. There is always that yearning to be fully and completely human which in any real human being is an unsatisfied desire. I believe The Fraction to be a recognition of that, that even what we offer to God participates in that brokenness, that incompleteness. It needs to be powerfully present because this is an aspect of our humanity that a whole lot of us in a whole lot of different ways run from. But even in that which we offer to God there is no way to escape from the fact that incompleteness is present.

But what it means to be God is to be able to take human incompleteness, or inadequacy, or sin, or whatever you want to call it, and to remind us that what we are, having been blessed by God and incorporated into God's purpose, is capable of expressing God's love. It doesn't make any difference what that life was which has been offered to God. God will create a purpose for it, and next Sunday he will have created a new purpose for it, based on the mess we have created during the week. And the next Sunday, a new purpose. Human beings cannot put themselves into positions where God can't offer them a future capable of expressing love. We can make it darned difficult and, perhaps in a few cases next door to impossible, but I simply don't believe that in this life and in this world that repentance into creative love is ever impossible.

Now I know that there are all kinds of medieval theologians who speculated about the possibility that certain acts would get you into a situation in which you had lost the capacity to repent. I've even dealt with certain people whom I would have liked to believe were in such a situation. Fortunately, I'm not God and that's one of the signs of it.

This is the second meaning of The Fraction: that it is not us as ideal people, or perfect people, it's not us in so far as we are something which we imagine God would like, that is blessed by God. It is precisely our moral, personal, communal messiness which gets blessed by God, so it is out of this messiness that the capacity to express God's love in this world comes. There is no life which we have to share with each other which is not broken life. And God has no life to share with us which isn't broken life, and that's what the cross means. The Fraction is saying that in every Eucharist the meaning of the cross of Christ is present, the meaning that God can take the worst that humans can do and

be and form from it a new world in which his love can be expressed. That's what the cross is about. And that's, I think, what The Fraction is pointing to.

Now, one more point and I'm done. And a good thing too.

Let's go to the gospel. When I'm giving these talks on liturgy, it's generally real trouble to get the gospel to relate to it, but sometimes I can do it. We have here Jesus selecting his disciples, and he says to each of them, "Follow me." In this particular story we have an example of someone who is initially skeptical, but later changes his tune. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Now there is a beginning which is beyond hostility, even rooting itself in contempt. And then the end of the story is belief. Notice what Jesus says, "Do you believe because I told you where you come from?" But then he says, in essence, "This is not a proper foundation for faith, this sort of magical trick I have just done for you." The proper foundation for faith is to see – and here things get symbolic and esoteric – "Angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." What in heaven's name does that mean? Well, I think it means that Jesus, for the Christian, is the means by which earth and heaven are joined. He is the means by which we know God. The angels, the messengers of God, those who make God known, move between heaven and earth by means of the Son of Man.

Now, just in case anyone has the wrong idea, and I don't think anyone will in this crowd, Jesus is always a lot more, always, than what the church points to. We only point to Jesus in a very disarticulated and fragmented way. But God calls the creation, the cosmos, in a complete and whole way. So Christ always surpasses, the Son of Man always surpasses, the awareness of the church. Another kind of church to run from is one which thinks they have an adequate Jesus or a corner on the Jesus market. That's saying that whatever the limitations of our imaginations are, God is no larger than that. And that's a pretty dangerous thing to say. I can think of no single thing which has done the church more harm through the ages than the belief that the Christ of God is limited in his reality to the imagination of the church. But, if you ask who this Jesus is who says, "Follow me"; if you ask concerning the question, "Who is the Son of Man?"; the early church's answer would have been, "The one who died, the one whose life was broken." And even God dies to incorporate our death into his love. And to be broken, as The Fraction points to breaking, is to accept that.

You see, I, at least – I don't know about you – would like to believe that what it means to be a Christian is to constantly get better and better. That presents me with a definite goal, and if there is anything Americans understand it's having measurable goals. And that's a good thing. It's not a bad thing to have measurable goals.

But what goes on at this altar, I'd like to believe in this community, is the incorporation of human failure and death, our failure and death, into the plan of love. That's always what God offers, that's where the mystery is. That's what the church needs to be pointing to, the incorporation of failure into the plan of love. And we don't know beforehand what that will look like. But wherever the scripture says "Watch!" that's what we are to be watching for: the incorporation of human failure into the plan of love. It's just like the bride's

maids, we also don't know when the bridegroom is coming. We don't know how this incorporation is going to happen, but opportunities for it are offered and once we see them we start stating goals and planning means. But the inception of God's gift of death being incorporated into life is not predictable.

But what The Fraction means is that being a Christian doesn't mean just to get better and better, but to practice the incorporation of death into life in order that nothing, even our deaths, be outside the sphere of the love of God. To be Christian is to practice a life in which what God gives us, out of our self offering to Him, is the capacity to love even as we die, daily and at the end. And that's what The Fraction means.

Now, I've really said enough about that. Please stand for the creed.