

Proper 16 B

John 6:56-69 Ephesians 6:10-20

The hiking group scrambled to the top of Yapoah Crater yesterday, a wonderful jaunt in the Three Sisters Wilderness, great views and just the right amount of breeze to keep the temperature comfortable. The only problem was a bit more hiking than I had anticipated. So I'm, well, at least ten years older today than I was yesterday morning. If you see me hobbling a bit, don't be surprised.

All I have to say about this gospel is quite ordinary. Most of you know my positions already. Think of this homily as parallel, in a theological setting, to a review of the elementary terms of grammar: something which needs to be done occasionally, but one isn't to expect anything new or even terribly interesting. This will be a review of the known in order to fix it more firmly in the mind.

First, this business about eating and drinking Jesus. Many people have an aversion to this language. In the today's gospel, Jesus himself alludes to this problem, and it's still with us. If, in your own conversations, you run into people with this difficulty, remember to be compassionate. People think in different ways. (After forty years of teaching, I'm beginning to get that one.) For folks whose thinking is concrete, it's automatic to interpret this language in a concrete, not a metaphoric or poetic way. So interpreted, it, of course, brings up all kinds of unpleasant associations and images. This concrete understanding is the first thing that comes to their minds, and first impressions are hard to shake. I've talked to people who say, "Yes, I understand that this language is to be taken figuratively, but it's just difficult to do so – I always have to self-consciously discard the concrete, literal understanding before I can go to the metaphoric. And the shadow of the concrete is always with me."

Well, all that is true. Tension between concrete and metaphoric understandings is a part of the framework within which the church lives. We can't abandon the use of figurative language – it's too deeply embedded in the tradition --and we can't abandon the attempt to enable these traditional images to be accessible to people who have difficulties with figurative language. It is not a difficulty they have chosen to have, or even one they want to have, but it's just part of the make up of their minds. Abstract thinkers are vulnerable to other theological problems. But the dangers of abstraction are not the subject of this homily.

My second point is more theological and less pastoral. What is the point to these images of eating and drinking? Well, a couple of things. First, eating and drinking are means of sustaining ordinary life. Try not eating for a while, and it becomes apparent that, in the long run, it's not a feasible option. So, in Christian terms, if our lives are to have coherence and meaning, life without God is not an option. Without regular use of the ways of knowing God -- scripture, prayer, community, meditation, service, the creation, but primarily the Eucharist -- there is a kind of starvation that begins to set in, a cutting lose from one's foundations, an entry into a lack of reality. If you know anyone who has suffered from physical starvation, you know it's hard to make rational judgments when one is hungry; it's hard to assess situations correctly. Without nourishment, one enters a land of unreality. This is as true in the world of spirit as in the world of flesh.

This is why the author of Ephesians talks about the importance of perseverance, of continuing to

receive and digest the kind of nourishment which feeds spiritual life, which feeds connection with God. Let's put it this way: all kinds of things happen to us which don't seem to fit the images of God we've been given, the understandings of God that we have. One of the challenges of the Christian life is to expand our understanding, even understanding in terms of that complicated set of responses, habits, practices which goes beyond intellectual acts and into an understanding by means of our total being. Our "global understanding" is always in a state of being challenged by what happens to us in the world. Part of the job of Christian perseverance is to always seek the connection between our experience and God. Always seek that connection.

It is as a part of this global understanding of the human condition that images of eating and drinking Christ come into their own. What other images could we find to so graphically refer to Christ's impact on every fiber and molecule of our being? Our connection with him affects the whole of our existence just as food does not sustain this or that part of the body but its whole capacity to live.

This, by the way, is one of the reasons why I – and this is just Jon Goman speaking for himself, not for the church -- can't accept the attitude towards the science-religion split which used to be, and in some quarters still is, quite prominent, and which says, "Over here, at my right hand, I have the world of spirit, of religion and of God. At my left we have the world of science, matter and things. These are two different worlds – and, as Kipling says in his *Ballad of East and West*, "... never the twain shall meet." I am unable to accept this position, for multiple reasons, one of which is that, intellectually, it's a coward's way out. It doesn't bring the full fruit, the full content of the spiritual world, to bear on the natural world and it doesn't bring the full reality of the natural world to bear on the spiritual. It's cowardly to duck challenges by positing a world, assuming a world, in which the challenge one experiences cannot, by definition, exist.

What we need, in dealing with the science/religion split, is to be able to experience disconnection within a framework of hope. We tend not to like suspended judgment or long term challenges. Give us something we can master quickly and then use in solving problems. In our exploration of both science and faith a marriage may become possible, but only after a significantly lengthy courtship. But hope is a Christian tool for dealing with long term tensions. Why we should not apply it to, for instance, the relation between science and religion or the relation between religion and contemporary culture, escapes me. These things are to be dealt with in the context of our hope. What hope means is admitting that we don't have all the answers yet, while not giving up the idea that there are answers. Hope works from the religious tradition as foundation and enables us to acknowledge the stupendous positive value of science at the same time as we seek its sometimes unapparent continuity with the religious tradition.

OK. End of digression. Back to basic question.

To ancient peoples, especially to the Jews, blood was, quite literally, life. They were aware that blood is always moving and believed that which moves to be alive. An illustration of this from a completely different part of the world: certain groups of Eskimos live on barren tundra, scattered with glacial erratics, round boulders sitting on the surface of the ground. The winds are so strong that they will push the rocks across the tundra. To the Eskimos, because the rocks move, each rock has a spirit connected to it. It moves, so it lives. Since blood is constantly moving, blood is life.

How do you participate in the life of another in a profound way? This Gospel's imagery says, and it's both a most profound and most shocking image, that you drink the life of the other being. The danger in this is that it gets thought about in a magical rather than a spiritual way. In a spiritual way, to live within someone else means, first, to recognize their separateness and independence, and then accept the gifts they have to offer as a part of one's own life. The more generous one becomes, the more the actual stuff of one's own life is within the lives of those to whom one's generosity has been expressed. If I'm a generous person, spiritually, physically, monetarily, my very being consists of that which I give away, giving becomes who I am. This is the opposite of participating in another's life by absorption, control or command.

This is what the imagery about the eating and drinking of Jesus is trying to express. Jesus, in fully giving himself away, fully enters into the life of his people. As what we eat fully becomes us. Anyway, that's how I would understand this imagery of eating and drinking. There are other ways to understand it. I wouldn't go so far as to say this is either the only correct or only useful way. But, for what it's worth, there it is.

Now, one last point. The idea, in a Christian community, is that the individuals in the community are linked with each other in an almost ironic way, through a mutual interest in developing the unique gifts of each person. Thus the unity of the community depends on the defense and development of the individuality of each separate person. It is only in affirming and protecting the individuality of others that each is enabled to give to the whole. So Christianity is in a most peculiar position, trying to create unity by affirming distinction. So far as I know, the church is one of the few human communities doing this. Technically, the educational community is supposed to do it, but I'm aware of some failings in that regard – but then I'm aware of failings of the church in this sphere, too. The temptation, of course, is to believe that unity can only be achieved through the creation of either uniformity or mechanical obedience. Neither of those is the Christian way. Which, by the way, is one of the reasons why that song, "You are the Potter. I am the clay . . ." makes my hair stand on end. If one isn't careful with that language, it seems to assert a unity through utter obedience, rather than one through the support of individuality and separateness and, therefore, through the creation by God of persons with unique gifts intended to be shared and unity arising through the sharing. Unity through the sharing of individuality, not through the creation of uniformity, is the Christian goal.

Now my reaction to language about potters and clay is probably on the order of the reactions of those people I talked about at the beginning of the sermon who stumble over language of eating the body and drinking the blood. But these are the kinds of things we have to work with in dealing with each other.

OK. That's all I have to say about that. Please stand for the creed.