

Homily – This Bread and This Cup

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Now, how many of you can look at these two pieces of bread and know which one has been consecrated. They look the same, so how can you tell which one is the body of Christ and which one is not.

During the Eucharist which we do on Sunday morning, the priest blesses the bread and wine on the altar. The priest asks the Holy Spirit to sanctify the bread and wine and makes the sign of the cross over them with his or her hands.

And, after we all say the Lord's Prayer together, the priest breaks at least one of the breads to signify the breaking of Jesus' body on the cross. Some priests will reverence or bow before the bread is broken, though I tend to bow after the breaking to honor and remember what Jesus has done for us.

Then, we distribute or hand out the bread and the wine, and if any is left over it is either consumed or drunk immediately by the altar party, or disposed of properly. We never put Jesus body and blood in the trash or down the drain. The left over consecrated bread is broken into small pieces and put out for the birds and critters to eat, and the left over wine is put down a special sink where the pipes goes directly into the dirt or ground and not into a sewer or septic system. In this way we honor the bread and the wine that, for us, have become the body and blood of Jesus.

But, once again, you can't tell by looking at them which one of these is consecrated and which one is not. Perhaps you think I would be holding the one of Jesus more reverently, or I would refuse to allow that one to drop on the ground.

By the way, Bishop Mary likes to say that we don't need to fret when consecrated bread falls to the ground, because Jesus knows when to jump in and jump out of the bread. So, we don't need to fret.

And, I am not going to allow either one of these to fall to the ground. That would just be poor form and a waste of good bread.

Now, three of this morning's Bible readings are about bread. And, for the next three Sundays in a row, our readings are also going to be about bread. We have the manna from heaven that was the daily bread provided to the Israelites as they wandered the desert. We have the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand with fish and bread. We have the comparison between the bread and food of this life versus the imperishable bread that comes from God.

This imperishable food is also known as Twinkies which supposedly, have a shelf-life of more than five years, and they don't need to be refrigerated either. I bet you never knew that Twinkies were in the Bible.

Be that as it may, in our readings we have the bread that comes from God, and finally we have Jesus saying *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*

When I looked in my Bible software yesterday, I found that bread is written 330 times in the Bible and wine is in there 299 times.

As Christians we have a lot of symbolism and theology wrapped up in bread and wine, and my "Dictionary of Biblical Imagery" has the following to say about bread. "Bread is one of many biblical images that, if traced through the canon, yields a picture of salvation history and biblical doctrine in microcosm. Salient points on the chart include:

- bread as a staple of life that comes to all people from God's providence,
- bread as a miraculous sustenance of life for God's chosen people in their wilderness wanderings at the time of the Exodus,
- bread as the spiritual reality of faith in Christ and his atoning death, and
- bread as the participation in the coming messianic banquet."

And, bread can mean a lot of things, but for me it is most closely associated with our Eucharist. In our Eucharist, bread is the body of Jesus given for us.

Now, throughout the centuries and across the breadth of our Church, there are several theories about how this bread is the body of Christ. Most Christians, even those who deny that there is any real change in the elements used, recognize a special presence of Christ in the bread used in the Eucharist. But Christians differ about exactly how, where and how long Christ is present in the Eucharistic bread. Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions teach that the reality (the "substance") of the elements of bread and wine is wholly changed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, while the appearances (the "species") remain.

The Orthodox use various terms such as Transubstantiation, but no 'explanation' is official as they prefer to leave it a mystery; transubstantiation is rejected as a philosophical definition and suspect because of the idea of substances smacks of magic.

However, Transubstantiation (change of the reality) is the term used by Roman Catholics to denote what is changed, not to explain how the change occurs, since the Roman Catholic Church teaches that "the signs of bread and wine become, in a way surpassing understanding, the Body and Blood of Christ".

Lutherans and Reformed Christians believe that the whole Christ, including the body and blood of Jesus, are present in the supper, a concept known as the sacramental union.

Lutherans specify that Christ is "in, with and under" the forms of bread and wine.

Anglicans, which includes our Episcopal Church, adhere to a range of views although the teaching in the Articles of Religion holds that body of Christ is received by the faithful only in a heavenly and spiritual manner.

And finally, some Christians reject the concept of the real presence, believing that the Eucharist is only a ceremonial remembrance or memorial of the death of Christ.

Now, as I said a moment ago, Episcopalians adhere to a range of views.

If we look at page 859 of our Book of Common Prayer, then we see the following questions and answers about the Eucharist.

The Holy Eucharist

Q. What is the Holy Eucharist?

A. The Holy Eucharist is the sacrament commanded by Christ for the continual remembrance of his life, death, and resurrection, until his coming again.

Q. Why is the Eucharist called a sacrifice?

A. Because the Eucharist, the Church's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, is the way by which the sacrifice of Christ is made present, and in which he unites us to his one offering of himself.

Q. By what other names is this service known?

A. The Holy Eucharist is called the Lord's Supper, and Holy Communion; it is also known as the Divine Liturgy, the Mass, and the Great Offering.

Q. What is the outward and visible sign in the Eucharist?

A. The outward and visible sign in the Eucharist is bread and wine, given and received according to Christ's command.

Q. What is the inward and spiritual grace given in the Eucharist?

A. The inward and spiritual grace in the Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ given to his people, and received by faith.

Q. What are the benefits which we receive in the Lord's Supper?

A. The benefits we receive are the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet, which is our nourishment in eternal life.

Q. What is required of us when we come to the Eucharist?

A. It is required that we should examine our lives, repent of our sins, and be in love and charity with all people.

This catechism is primarily intended to give an outline for instruction. It is a commentary on the creeds, but is not meant to be a complete statement of belief and practices; rather, it is a point of departure for the teacher, and it is cast in the traditional question and answer form for ease of reference.

The second use of this catechism is to provide a brief summary of the Church's teaching for an inquiring stranger who picks up a Prayer Book.

And finally, the catechism may be used to form a simple service; since the matter is arranged under headings, it is suitable for selective use, and the leader may introduce prayers and hymns as needed.

Over the next three weeks as we work our way through some of the "bread" passages in the New Testament, we will hear about other aspects of bread and other aspects of the Eucharist. Our study is not complete on this important topic.

But, let me end today with the words found in an invitation to the Eucharist from Iona Abby. *"The table of bread and wine is now to be made ready. It is the table of company of Jesus, and all who love him. It is the table of sharing with the poor of the world, with whom Jesus identified himself. It is the table of communion with the earth, in which Christ became incarnate. So come to this table, you who have much faith and you who would like to have more; you who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time; you who have tried to follow Jesus, and you who have failed; come. It is Christ who invites us to meet him here."*