

Thomas R. Cook
The Church of St. Stephen the Martyr – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 16, 2015

“Theology, Not Biology”

Scripture: John 6:51-58; 11 Pentecost B (Proper 15)

You know, I have never found all this talk about eating “flesh and blood” to be all that appetizing. And no matter how sophisticated I think I might be, I can still get hung up on the language. So, Roman Catholic doctrine of *Transubstantiation* notwithstanding, I personally feel it is a good thing that Christians know how to deal in symbolism when we see it. While the language might be unsettling, the meaning is clear: the flesh and blood of Jesus refers to his life, and his life refers to his way of living. And the signs or symbols in which we share the “flesh and blood” of Jesus are found in everyday common materials of bread and wine. We *eat* bread and wine, but we *understand* “flesh and blood,” because flesh and blood represent that which is alive. So, we symbolically take into ourselves the life of Jesus. We share in the life of Jesus when we share in the flesh and blood represented in the bread and wine. And we believe Christ is truly present with us. It’s as “simple” as that.

So when Jesus says “*unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you,*” he is commenting on *theology*, not *biology*. These are living, breathing people to whom

he is talking in the synagogue, and he knows it. He isn't telling them they aren't alive, so much as he is telling them that their lives need to stretch farther than the limited bounds of their own needs and the finite number of days they would have those needs. Jesus is talking not simply about life, but about a way of life. And when we take into our lives his life, when we *eat the flesh and drink the blood* of Jesus (to use his own words), we are showing that we want to live like him, that we will in turn seek to live like him, we will live our life as he lives life, we will be empowered by him, find our meaning and energy through him. The life of Jesus is the entrée in our meal for spiritual nutrition.

Now please remember that Jesus was well acquainted with the idea and, ultimately, the experience of dying. Just because we eat good food in our daily lives does not mean that our bodies go on forever, so clearly eating the “flesh and blood” of Jesus isn't intended as some miraculous means to an unending corporeal life. Again, Jesus speaks of the life of spirit, the hope of which is now manifested and growing in the experience of this life of flesh and blood. And the promise we know as Christians is this: when our bodies end, we are raised to new life in spirit, just as we believe Jesus is raised as well. And all this is happening even as we live now, taking our sustenance in Jesus.

We've likely all heard the statement: "You are what you eat." But maybe it isn't just that we *are* what we eat, but that we are *how* we eat. Think about a good Thanksgiving Dinner. It isn't all about the turkey and dressing. A lot of the meaning in Thanksgiving dinner derives from coming together with family and friends, sharing experience that which helps us feel alive, focusing upon the things that are important in life, things like love and togetherness, sitting around the table sharing stories and experiences, being happy or sad or embarrassed, maybe a little frustrated with each other even. And when Thanksgiving is working well, we don't turn into turkey and dressing, rather we turn into... family. It takes time and commitment and contact and vulnerability with one another. We have to learn our family stories. We have to bear each other's burdens. We have to be together.

It's the same with Church. Oh, I guess we can try to avoid all that togetherness... Some of you might remember the little craze that hit some churches not too long ago for "Drive-Thru" Holy Communion. Literally. Pull your car up to the window, printed sermon handed to you to read later at your convenience, somebody inside the building says a little prayer, you leave a donation if you like, and you get food and drink to go around in the form of Holy Communion in little pre-sealed plastic containers, right there in the convenience of your own automobile. In and out in minutes, never leave your car. It's *Burger King* meets Jesus.

But there is a problem with a perennial diet of fast food. There is no nutrition in it. There's no sharing of life. You can't really have drive-thru family Thanksgiving dinner. And I don't think we can have drive-thru or "drop-in" Holy Communion either.

Because it isn't only about what we eat, but how we eat it. We don't turn into bread and wine because we share in this meal, any more than we turn into turkey and dressing at Thanksgiving Dinner. No, in the sharing of this meal of Holy Communion week by week, in hearing the stories of our faith, in carrying one another's sorrows and sharing one another's joys, in meeting the children, in listening to the elders, in praying for and encouraging the sick person, in forgiving the person in the pew who has offended us, in welcoming the stranger, in helping another, we become that much more like Jesus. And Jesus offered his life for the sake of others, and he did that in community with others, his friends, his disciples, and those who didn't like him much. In shared Holy Communion we become that much closer as God's family. We draw that much nearer to living in the ways of eternal life. We find sustenance for our spirit. It takes time and effort and commitment and contact with one another. The life of faith takes more than drive-thru practice. It is, really, a "sit-down meal." So, welcome to the table.