

## **OPENING**

One Sunday at a particular church, the service was going on and the Eucharistic Prayer had just begun. The congregation was silent—either standing stiffly or kneeling in reverence. The priest got to the words of institution, changing the inflection of his voice ever so slightly to reflect their importance:

“Take, eat. This is my Body, which is given for you...” “Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you.”

At that moment, when the priest was repeating Jesus’ words, all of the sudden a small girl interjected in a loud voice: “Ewwww.... Yuk.”

The congregation was aghast, “as if someone had splattered blood all over the altar — which, in effect, is just what the little girl had done with her exclamation.”<sup>1</sup>

Another story: when I was in college, there was an English professor who loved to push the envelope, to challenge his students in difficult, even shocking ways. One class, the subject of Christianity, and of the Eucharist/ Holy Communion, came up and the professor asked bluntly:

“Does that mean you eat your God? And.... What happens next to that little wafer, after it had been ingested...” this teacher went on “... think about it.”

In the classroom, we all did not know how to respond, as stunned as that congregation interrupted by that small girl, and as stunned as the crowd in our Gospel reading —this notion of cannibalism reverberating in all three stories.

## **METAPHOR:**

The obvious response, though one that Jesus was unwilling to give, is that we are dealing with metaphor, language that points to a higher truth. Clearly, Jesus does not mean to say that he is a combination of flour and water. His statement should not be understood literally, but neither is it a casual symbol that can be dismissed or changed into whatever we feel like.

Jesus said: “I am the Bread of Life”—he meant it, it’s true. It’s our life’s work, as Christians, to reflect on our understanding of these words and what we mean when we consume the Blood and Wine. No two Episcopalians probably understand it in the exact same way, but we keep at it, almost reflexively.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-12-b-meeting-the-carnal-god/>

This passage compels us to pause, to imagine ourselves in John's scene, or as a college sophomore challenged by a cantankerous English professor, or as a small child about to be confronted with something very strange.

### **GODLY PLAY:**

Let's take the latter then as a jumping off point. At the Church of the Good Shepherd, we use as our curriculum for those ages 3 to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade a program called "Godly Play." Godly Play is Montessori-style Christian education, designed originally by an Episcopal Priest, that seeks to encourage the natural wonder and curiosity of the young person. Rather than perceiving the child as an empty and blank vessel, ready to be filled up with religious content and doctrine, it assumes that young people, that all human beings really, have a natural and spontaneous relationship with God.

To encourage that relationship and to help provide the religious language that might explain the mystery, Godly Play uses interactive story telling that stimulates the young person's sense of wonder and excitement about God. I would describe it as holy and beautiful exercise that is sacred in its implementation. There are no worksheets, no Bible verses to memorize. Instead, the young people sit on the floor in a circle while being guided by an adult storyteller who, unassumingly, helps tell the story of that week. After the story is done, students are encouraged to pursue a variety of tactile based centers, filled with materials that guide the children to learn more about parables or the church calendar or Biblical geography, etc. These are called, paradoxically, "works."

### **BACK to the LESSON:**

But, back to our lesson, imagine if Jesus were to try to help those in today's Gospel understand what exactly he was getting at with "I am the bread of life."

Godly Play helps explain the metaphor, in a lesson entitled "The Circle of the Holy Eucharist."

In it, the story teller takes a set of green pieces of felt and places them on the ground, and then places white cards with the words of the different parts of the service on them: "The Opening" "The Collect" "The Old Testament Lesson" "Sermon" "Creed" "Confession"... and the rest.

With each card, the storyteller gives a brief description of that part of the service, leaving space for the children to ask questions, if they wish.

As an example, here is what the story teller says about "The Sermon"<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> [Liturgical Action- Circle of the Holy Eucharist](#)

*After the reading of God's Word in the Bible, someone comes and tries to say something about what was read. It is not easy. Sometimes you have to listen very carefully. This is hard for the grownups, too.*

### **CHANGE:**

Here is though what the story teller says at the hinge point in the service, right after the Peace and the Announcements and right before the Offertory and the Holy Eucharist, the point between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Table.

*Look, now we change. The time of the readings and thinking about them is over. The prayers have been said. We now get ready to do something very different. We prepare for Holy Communion. It helps us go where words and thinking alone cannot take us. (It helps us go where words and thinking alone cannot take us.)<sup>3</sup>*

In order to know Christ, we stand up, march forward, hold out our hands, chew the bread, and taste the wine, all in a multimedia experience of sensory perception. We do so in the most visceral, intimate of ways, by consumption, ingestion, close engagement. That is to be our knowledge of Christ.

Thus, although words and belief are important in the Gospel of John and in our lives, here John's Gospel gets thicker than that and so does our Liturgy. According to William Willimon: "Jesus intends to have all of us, body and soul. His truth wants to burrow deep within us, to consume as we consume him, to flow through our veins, to be digested, to nourish every nook and cranny of our being."<sup>4</sup>

### **GIVE ME JESUS:**

A few weeks ago, if you attended the 10:15 AM service, you probably recall that we had the most remarkable soloist sing at Good Shepherd. She delivered the powerful anthem "Give Me Jesus" right at that hinge moment of the service between Word and Table, between Belief and Action. It provoked tears in the altar party, cheers from the congregation, and its words leapt down our collective throats.

The chorus is as follows:

*Give me Jesus.*

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<sup>3</sup> [Liturgical Action- Circle of the Holy Eucharist](#)

<sup>4</sup> William Willimon "Homiletical Perspective." 2015. *Feasting on the Word. Year B, Volume 3*. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 361.

*give me Jesus,  
you may have all this world,  
give me Jesus.*

To risk trying to explain the beauty of that moment, and thereby ruining it, here's my take on it:

What a sacramental way of understanding the world! *Give me Jesus*. What an Incarnational, fleshy, honest, simple, beautiful, way of saying that, when it comes down to it, one wants the most profound intimacy with the Body of Christ.

I should have said *that* to my college English teacher. But, I did not get to go through Godly Play as a child though.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Here is what the Godly Play card says for "Communion":

*People come forward now to receive the holy bread and holy wine. Jesus is with us in the bread and wine and we are all together, all over the world, and with all who have lived and died in this huge family of families called the Church*

I think children intuitively recognizes the importance and the significance of that moment, and the messiness of it. Something amazing is going on there, you are encountering the risen Christ, we are all doing it together, you are changed by that moment, in that moment.

*Give Me Jesus  
In the morning when I rise  
Give Me Jesus  
When I die.*

### **AGAIN**

*We have gone as far as words alone can take us. We have heard the word of God and reflected on it. We have lifted up our prayers to God and sung praise to God in our music. We have confessed our sins, received forgiveness, and greeted one another in peace. In all these ways, we have shared the great Story of our salvation. Now we continue that story, a story we can hear, and see, and taste.*

**AMEN.**