

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost - Year B
August 16, 2009
The Reverend Brett P. Backus

“Unity”

John 6:51-58

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

So, having returned from our recent Ascension mission trip to Bolivia, I began to see that there was at least one main experience or lesson that was being lifted up again and again by team members as being one of the most important or valued parts of their journey. This lesson was the realization that regardless of the language, social, economic, or cultural barriers that seem to separate us, we are all truly part of one Body in Christ. I bring this up to you all this morning because I think it not only is a part of what Christ is saying to us all in this morning’s Gospel reading, but that it is also a message that we and today’s entire Body of Christ desperately need to hear.

We encounter Jesus this morning in the middle of the only part in John that can be considered the institution of the Holy Eucharist. In John, there is no last supper scene as in other Gospels. However, for an Episcopalian, or a member of any other liturgical church for that matter, it is natural for us to hear Jesus’ words as a call to celebrate the Eucharist. After all, we are a Eucharist centered people. Our Sunday worship services are named after it and everything in those services lead up to it. The sacrament of Holy Communion is a core part of our identity as Christians. Having said this though, I want to question this morning what it is that we actually hear or understand in Jesus’ words, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

The most obvious answer to this question is that we understand Christ to be talking about our unity with Him through our participation in the Holy Eucharist. In today’s Gospel, Christ is pointing us to the miraculous truth that through our conscious acceptance of His sacrifice for us, we are eternally bound to Him and He to us. For the most part, I think that this is pretty well understood by all who come to this altar rail to receive the Holy Sacrament. Of course, as Episcopalians, we always face the challenge of coming to the altar rail out of routine and not in a clear and intentional way. However, we mainly understand that when we kneel here before this altar, we are taking part in and living out an incredibly powerful truth that is much bigger than any of us. We know that through each of

our own Baptisms into the Body of Christ and through our participation in and consumption of the Holy Eucharist, we are able to experience a true unity with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Yet, I find myself asking this morning if there could be more to what Jesus is saying to us in today's Gospel reading? Though it is not said directly, I do think that there is another message implied in Jesus' words this morning that is very important for us to hear. You see, while the main message in Jesus' words to us does seem to point to our unity with Him, I think that when one takes these words a little deeper, it is possible to take Jesus' message to another level. Jesus' words about the connection we all enjoy with Him through our Baptism and participation in the Eucharist also contain within them another message. This message is about another powerful and intimate connection, our connection to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and as equal parts and members of the One Body of Christ.

What Ascension's Bolivian mission team realized through their experience of sharing with and working together with other members of the Body of Christ from another side of the world, we too are called to see through Jesus' words today. Christ's words to us this morning urge us to realize that our unity with Him runs much deeper than just a strong connection between our Savior and our individual selves. Jesus shows us today that it is through our deep connection to Him, through His abiding in us and us in Him that we in turn are intimately and profoundly connected to one another as well. Being a part of the Body of Christ is not just some nice idea that we hear from Paul, it is our reality as Christians. Ok, but why is this so important for us to hear today?

This other, perhaps inferred side of Jesus' message is important for us all to hear today because we are currently living in a fractured world. We are living in a world today that seems to be becoming increasingly divided. We are divided by race, language, social class, and culture. We are divided by political lines and by default of membership in differing world religions, and we are even sadly dividing ourselves more and more within our own Christian religion and even within our own denominations. We truly live in a divided world, but Jesus' message for us this morning, as it so often does, brings us hope. Better yet, Jesus' message for us today opens us up to a reality that if only realized and lived into by all who follow Him, holds the potential to change this divided world for the better.

It holds true potential to bring us all back to our intended unity, not as a people divided by a bunch of arbitrary lines, but united and equal as God's children. You see, at the end of

the day, it doesn't really matter in how many ways we want to divide or separate ourselves. It doesn't matter who is in the right group and who is in the wrong. After all, that is the absolute beauty of our Anglican theology and heritage. The only thing that truly matters at the end of the day is our gathering together here in His name. All that matters is our gathering together in any place as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, even amidst our great differences, to live out the reality that we are truly and completely united, but only because of the simple fact that Jesus abides in each of us and each of us in Him. It's not about us, it's about Him.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

Amen