

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Ephesians 5:15-20, Psalm 111, John 6:51-58
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A young man asked the master, "Can you teach me the goal of human life?"

"I cannot," replied the master.

"Or at least the meaning?" he asked further.

"I cannot," the master answered once more.

"Can you indicate to me the nature of death and of life beyond the grave?"

"I cannot."

The young man walked away in scorn. The disciples were dismayed that their master had been shown in a poor light.

Said the master soothingly, "Of what good is it to comprehend life's nature and life's meaning if you have never tasted it? I'd rather you ate your pudding than speculated on it."

This morning in John's gospel, Jesus takes the bread of life motif a little further calling himself "the living bread that came down from heaven." We might even say he uses disturbing language in saying that this bread is his flesh, and one must eat it as well as drink his blood to have eternal life.

Our minds immediately equate this to our regular, ritual practice of communion, the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist. First century Jews, however, upon hearing these words would have been shocked and scandalized. In the first place, eating human flesh was repugnant to them as it is to us today, and in Leviticus, Chapter 17 – part of the Jewish Law – we read, "For the life of every creature is the blood of it; therefore I have said to the people of Israel, you shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off." (17:14) This meant no lean juicy meat.

Scholars disagree over whether these verses in John's gospel are meant to be understood literally or figuratively. Is Jesus referring to the flesh and blood he will sacrifice for us on the cross, or are we meant to understand the sacrament of communion as a literal eating of his flesh and blood? Whereas some Christian denominations believe the Eucharistic bread and wine become the actual flesh and blood of Christ, Episcopalians are allowed a range of beliefs. For us, it can be the actual body and blood or a symbolic representation, which we take to remember Jesus' sacrifice. Another middle position is what we call "Actual Presence." By this we mean that we believe Jesus is actually present in the sacrament, but we don't know how. This is probably the most commonly held belief for most Episcopalians.

The point of my earlier story told by Anthony de Mello of the master and the young man who questions him is that the sacrament needs to be tasted, partaken of, to appreciate its fullest meaning for each of us.

Part of my training in seminary was to spend a summer as a chaplain at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC. This large hospital housed long- and short-term mentally ill patients as well as the criminally insane including John Hinckley, the man who shot President Reagan.

In addition to having responsibility for a couple of elderly wards, I met with young men who were arrested and brought to the facility for being under the influence of a drug called Ecstasy. This drug often caused violent outbursts, but by the time I saw them a few days later, they were sober and calm.

Once a week other chaplains and I held a communion service for these men, most of whom had no religious upbringing, or they had been psychologically damaged by their parents' very strict religious practices. I'll never forget one of these services when we explained simply that the bread and wine was Jesus wanting to be a part of their lives. One man abruptly but excitedly shouted out, "Wow! That's something!" He perfectly testified to the importance of tasting and partaking. "I'd rather you ate your pudding than speculated on it."

This may be good reason to have open communion for all in attendance at all our services. A priest friend of mine said that he regularly gave communion to some Jewish persons, who attended his church occasionally, even after his bishop cautioned him about it. A few years later, they asked to be baptized.

How important is experiencing, tasting, participating? I think it is absolutely critical for understanding, enlightenment and transformation. We believe in Christ, heaven and the kingdom of God because we, at least in part, have experienced or tasted these.

Last Tuesday nine of us from Christ and Grace painted a classroom at the J.E.B. Stuart Elementary School. Our group included three teens and six adults. Two other church groups were there painting other rooms nearby. I can't speak for the others, but the experience for me was in part what I think heaven is going to be like. We quickly organized ourselves to do various jobs around the room. We encouraged one another, laughed a lot, did a little singing while we worked (Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA* was a favorite.). We looked after each other's needs for water or equipment and helped clean up each other's drips or spills. There was never a harsh word or moment of frustration. We completed the task with a deeply satisfying feeling of accomplishment and shared some ideas to purchase a few items to further improve the room's appearance and functionality. It was a joyous time marked especially by the fact that we were helping others, even people we would never meet.

The last thing we did before going home was to share pizza among ourselves and with the other groups working there. It was a Eucharist meal of sorts, and pizza never tasted so good.

A moment ago we sang *'tis a gift to be simple*. This popular Shaker hymn is about leading a simple life and doing, as best as we can determine, what God wants for us. When we find it, we'll know we are in the right place – “the valley of love and delight.”

For me and I suspect many of you, that right place is so often when we are together. Whether it's Sunday morning or evening at the Celtic service or at a ballgame, a planning meeting, preparing food in the kitchen for a reception or painting a classroom, Jesus is right there (or very present) because we have chosen to accept his offer to come to him, and more so, feast on him in both Word and Sacrament. Jesus so permeates our lives that we experience eternal life or heaven on earth.

Through weekly participation in the communion, we become one with Christ, assume his very nature, and then take that existence out into every aspect of our lives. It wouldn't be surprising, if we truly believed this, that we didn't at least say to ourselves on occasion as we leave the altar, “Wow, That's something!” AMEN.