

Proper 16 Year B

“So Jesus asked the twelve, do you also wish to go away”

Back in my former life in business in a galaxy far, far away, one of the insurance companies we represented denied coverage on a complicated worker's compensation claim. The insured, our customer, sued the insurance company arguing that the claim should be covered, and their lawyer persuaded them to include our agency in the suit, which is not uncommon, and that meant I as the head of the agency got sued as well....well I had never been sued before and it scared me half to death....my first reaction to pending crises in general is to imagine the worst...I could see me and my family cast out into the streets begging for food...the legal process chugged along and finally the time came when I was to give a deposition. The deposition was to be held at my lawyer's office. My lawyer, who was a friend of my late father, could tell that I was nervous, my heart pounding, palms sweating....He looked at me cool as a cucumber (do they teach that in law school) and said unblinking with a southern drawl grown gravelly over his many years of advocacy in the world of jurisprudence....Aw, Jim don't worry... “just remember they can kill you but they can't eat you”....well that really calmed my nerves! I understood that he was speaking metaphorically of course, a vivid metaphor at that, but I had a real uneasy feeling as to what that metaphor might mean....there must have been a thousand other things he could have said to calm me down...I wondered if he had said that to other clients....they can kill you but they can't eat you. Whew! It still makes my palms sweat.

In today's gospel the writers of John continue with the extended metaphor of feeding, eating and drinking, of nurture....in fact the entire sixth chapter of John deals with this metaphor....At the feeding of the five thousand, the point is made that a small sacrifice can provide abundant nurture beyond our imagining, that sacrifice in God's realm bears exponential blessing....and then Jesus makes the point, the metaphorical, metaphysical point that he is the bread from heaven that will nurture the life of the world....and if one connects these two stories, then one may deduce that small acts of sacrifice set loose Jesus' nurturing life in earth, exponentially... Jesus an icon for a way of life as God intends it....and then Jesus changes the metaphor and refers to this life giving bread as his very flesh... his flesh now the life given for the world....and that his blood is life giving drink....a vivid and unsettling metaphor to say the least....vivid for obvious reasons (I'm still thinking of my lawyer friend) and unsettling because any

Jewish hearer of this teaching would be offended because the Jews as well as the Temple priests were ritually forbidden to partake of blood...the preparation of sacrifices in the Temple dealt principally with ridding the sacrificial animals of their blood...blood in the ancient world considered to be the very life force...and even today, in our post Enlightenment scientific world, blood is the same...the essence of life...without it we are dead.

Then in this peculiar metaphorical twist, we are told that many of the disciples leave, offended, grossed out in short...who can stand such a teaching they say.....These people are the literalists, the fundamentalists of their day...and as literalists and fundamentalists they just never get the point...then as now. When we here in this church at this altar call the bread and wine body and blood...we're not being literal are we!?...we are speaking metaphorically, dare I say mythologically as to the profound meaning of our humanity as it relates to God...the church of course has always struggled when it comes to scripture with the tension between mythological truth and literal fact...and I want to say that if we take a strict literalist approach to scripture, not only confuse ourselves but worse we kill its meaning...we miss the life giving point of what our sages and prophets over the ages are trying to say to us.

And while we're on the subject of flesh and blood, you know that the Roman Church has for centuries argued over whether the bread and the wine at Eucharist actually become flesh and blood...and the literalists, at least in terms of official doctrine won out, the so-called doctrine of transubstantiation that holds that this magical transformation indeed takes place... not that all that many Romans believe that, but that's never stopped the Vatican before...the Romans officially believe that the bread and wine become body and blood, when you can see for yourself it's bread and it's wine....

ABSURD.... and to believe such an absurdity is to miss the mysterious and beautiful power of the Eucharist....to miss the point yet again...It too, the Eucharist, a high metaphor of who we are in relationship with God....a symbol, a glimpse onto the truth of our passing journey in this world.... metaphors, symbols and their meanings evolve as the world and our knowledge of it evolve; who knows what we'll be teaching about the Eucharist a thousand years from now....We cannot live a spiritual life without an engaged imagination open to infinite possibility is my point.

But for the moment I want to reflect on a possible meaning of Jesus' difficult teaching in this passage:....Since the beginning of life...It is the meal that sustains us...that puts us then into the realm of myth...the myth of the Eucharist, the story of our nature....We gather here as often as we are able to remember that...to remember that unless we see that we are all fed

then we die, and we remember also that meals engender life giving community...It's that simple and that profound....Jesus' blood is life (blood the essence of life) and flesh... labor, I propose... our bodily existence to work for the good of the whole....to offer one's life and labor is to offer one's blood and one's flesh, and to do so will nurture and sustain many... unto generations to come....and the means of offering life and labor are infinite...

And the lynchpin of this gospel that occurs just a few chapters hence is that Jesus tells his disciples that we, his disciples, are sent as he is sent... We brothers and sisters are to offer our flesh to be eaten, and we are to offer our blood to be drunk....As we say that these elements on the altar, the bread and wine, are Jesus' body and blood...so too then are our bodies and blood offered on this altar....a vivid metaphor to be sure....a cardinal piece of our human mythology....that we exist for the nurture and sustainability of our world....and that mythology has far reaching ramifications:....in matters of justice...in matters of food and shelter for our least...in matters of peacemaking...in matters of ecology...in matters of healthcare....in matters of education...in anything that has to do with the proper nurture and proper sustainability of God's created order....that is what transubstantiation means: that the life of God is incarnate, made flesh in the world through our life and labor, in and through our being eaten and drunk... our life and labor offered upon the altar of life eternally, made into heavenly food... transformed flesh and blood for the world's sake....get it? See the metaphorical profundity....there are some who won't... as ever...but it is for us, the people of the faith, and in particular for us Episcopalians who traditionally value language as beautiful...words, metaphors unto themselves also....we believe that beauty via the imagination informs and therefore we are predisposed to "get it"....not that others won't...but metaphorical thinking is in our DNA when it comes to faith...an unabashed plug for the Episcopal Church!....but I'll stand my ground and say that without the engaged imagination faith is rendered feeble...that is why Jesus taught in parables, metaphors to hook the imagination into discovery and inspiration.

For me, I can give myself wholeheartedly to such a faith...not to a magic, supernatural faith...but to a faith embedded in Nature infused by the Spirit, the Spirit which is the imagination alive and at work.... in which we are deeply engaged and contingent, in which we matter deeply for the world's sake....we, the very body and blood of God, transubstantial, set loose in the world....that is a faith to which I can give myself....and that is a faith from which I have no place else to go.