

Proper 15 Year B 2024

Well, we're still in the Gospel of John for two more Sundays.... This Sunday and next, then we get back to the Gospel of Mark.... I'm always struck by the profound difference between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. If one were to ask you, "Do you know Jesus?" The answer would be... "Which one?" The point is, that when it comes to the figure of Jesus, there are many points of view. We have been reading the narrative about the feeding of the five thousand, followed by Jesus' teaching about what this so-called miraculous feeding means.... Certainly you know by now that the writers of John insist on metaphor as the means of speaking of God, and Jesus as well. They are not presenting an historical narrative; they are speculating as to the philosophical and cosmic significance of the God, who is not distant and aloof, but fills the earth. The writers of this gospel pay a lot of attention to this story having to do with bread.... In a way they are obsessed with it... This story gives rise to the metaphor that Jesus is the true bread come down from heaven... and then the jarring premise that this bread from heaven, this true, eternal nurture, is Jesus' own flesh and blood... next Sunday we'll read about how those listening to Jesus' teaching get up and leave... grossed out perhaps.... Missing the point, certainly.

You remember that this gospel is principally about Christology... that is, a theology, a philosophical reverie about who this person Jesus is... but I want to suggest that just as much; just as much as this gospel is about the theology of Jesus.... It is just as

much a theological anthropology... that is to say, a theology in consideration of the human community.... Jesus the symbolic figure thereof.... Jesus the lens through whom we see ourselves... and Jesus the lens through which God sees us Indeed Jesus tells his disciples in this gospel that they are sent as he is sent; and in another place he calls them gods (that didn't make it into the lectionary).... And in the prologue we are told that Jesus, the Word, that which was in the beginning, is light, another metaphor... and that the light is the light of humankind.... This, of course, is a far cry from the medieval theology that we have inherited in our culture that would claim that humankind is depraved... that we are fallen... that there is no health in us... that we are unworthy to gather up the crumbs from under God's table... those of you who have been Episcopalians for a long time remember those words from the prayer of humble access that we said down on our knees just before receiving communion... ironically after we had been absolved from our sin... 'we are not worthy to gather up the crumbs from under thy table'... that is strangely convenient... because if we are so pathetic then why bother in this life... why not wait passively for perfection in the life to come... why bother about anything other than lamenting our sin and hoping for our own salvation... The church for centuries has made a living on such a theology.... Fear and control... and that, brothers and sisters, is a pathology from which we need to be set free.... In scripture, and particularly in this gospel, there is no warrant for such a theology.... For John, we are sent as the Christ is sent... and therefore we are bread come down from heaven.... It is our flesh that is to be eaten... and it is our blood that is to be drunk. We

become the metaphor.... The incarnation, the enfleshment of God in earth, is the high mythology of humankind.... It is a story of our true nature... the human come down from heaven as nurture... eternal nurture for our neighbor.... Because like the one who made us we bear the capacity to love; that's what it means to be made in God's image... that we love... and love changes everything; redeems everything.... Jesus is the shining example of what it means to love.... To sacrifice... to wash his friends' feet... to welcome the stranger and outcast.... To feed, to heal.... To have skin in the game, as God has skin in the game.

That is a phrase that financier Warren Buffett claims to have coined... you know, you recommend an investment in which you also have a stake... so if your client suffers then you suffer with them.... Shakespeare actually coined the phrase in the Merchant of Venice.... Shylock renounces his responsibility for the good of his fellows... he only serves himself. He has no stake in the fate of his friends... and of course that is his undoing.... The reality is that our skin is in the game... an incarnational presence.... We are all connected to one another... all of us humans share almost exactly the same DNA... we are all of the same source, the same origin, the same substance.... We are all of the primordial word sung in the beginning of time.... The word which is the very imagination of God in which we share as community... made for creative solidarity. We are one organism.... All made up of strands of intimate kinship.... That's why Paul says that when one part of the body suffers we all suffer... when one is shamed and

debased... we are all shamed and debased.... Sin is the lie that tells us we are self-sufficient... that we are uniquely individual.... We are not unique as individuals, and we have no identity except that which we have as members of the human community, living and dead... the never ending succession of those who suffer, those who exult, those who succeed, those who fail... those who experience love and loss... and grief and joy... none of us are unique. We are in intimate solidarity as humans...The sentimental notion that God made 'only one you'... made no one like you... is an illusion.... We are all of the one flesh... we are all the same in infinite ways... We are all born, all of us are born for just one thing, and that is to love.... To offer as living sacrifices our bodies and blood... blood being life.... Body being labor... our life and labor for the world... that is the theological anthropology of John... a high and noble calling, vital for God's dream for the world. The Gospel of John doesn't present dogma.... It is high poetry.

Flesh and Blood is a metaphor of mythological proportions for these writers... a symbol for radical empathy. And it is a symbol of presence, physical presence. We are to embody the love of God for the world.... Why is it that justice has so often been achieved by people going into the streets? Because it is flesh and blood that changes things. Love requires flesh and blood. Being a light to the world is not about ascribing to some belief system, or a flash of awareness, or the possession of some discreet knowledge; it is about being proximate to the world's brokenness. It is our flesh and blood, the utter commitment of our life and labor, that will cause Black lives to matter.

It is our flesh and blood that will welcome the asylum seeker and the immigrant. It is our flesh and blood that will see to the protection of voting rights in order to give voice to all people without regard to wealth or station. It is our flesh and blood that will sit down with our LGBTQ brothers and sisters at the table of welcome and dignity. It is flesh and blood that will mitigate the violence raging in our streets owing to the mass proliferation of firearms. It is our flesh and blood that will close the insidious gap between rich and poor. It is our flesh and blood that will save this planet from the coming climate catastrophe. These are Covenant issues, Gospel issues, salvation issues, because they have to do with engendering a just and sustainable society. And such engendering finds its life in the imagination, in the poetry of our lives. The writers of this mystic Gospel proclaim Jesus as the Logos, the “reasonableness of God.” They are speaking of the imagination, the very Spirit of God which we bear to the world in our bodies. It is our imaginative presence that makes all things new. Activism is a means of presence. And presence makes our faith a powerful witness to the truth. A powerful witness which will challenge the fallacies that infect our world.

Several years ago, after the murder of George Floyd, to show our solidarity with our black sisters and brothers as a parish, we hung a Black Lives Matter banner over our front doors, facing Government Street. I was interviewed by a reporter from one of the local television stations. When the interview began, he introduced me as the pastor of a “progressive” Christian Church. I winced at the tired label. I hear, and you hear people

around town saying we are that “liberal church.” But as I told the reporter, we are a Gospel Church. A church serious about being light; serious about being Christ’s body in the world. We believe, like our brother Jesus, in binding up the brokenhearted and loving kindness; like our brother Jesus, we believe in doing justice, welcoming the stranger, dignifying the outcast. If that mission, if that vision fits another label, then so be it. But we, brothers and sisters, are to be a light to the world, bread from heaven... sent as Jesus was sent so that our very flesh and blood, Love’s temple, will be shelter and sustenance and empowerment for the many.

Love, and all that Love embodies, is light for the world: mercy, healing, empathy, justice.... The sacrifice of our lives and our labor, Love, in short, gives it flesh and blood.... Blessed, broken, and given.