



July 24, 2022 – The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Brock Baker, Sabbatical Priest
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Last year I took a course for ministers in Transitional Ministry and two teachings stood out for me: what's known as Appreciative Inquiry and understanding the parish as a System, which in this use, means a single organism. Appreciative Inquiry should take place when a minister enters a parish for the first time, which is to seek out what is going well and affirming it specifically because what is going well currently is a sign of where God is already powerfully at work. And because in an organism the part and the whole are connected, how a part is doing affects the whole of the parish, and benefits the whole of the parish.

In the restricted opportunities of being your temporary priest, I cannot attempt to claim to have surveyed the church. But what I have been able to discern as going well is the commitment of most of you who attend a service to come forward to receive Communion.

To reiterate: to discern, affirm and hold up to the rest of the parish, a ministry, which is to say an activity that proclaims the kingdom of God is near—in fact here—where God is already powerfully at work increases the well-being, the hopefulness, and the presence in power of the Holy Spirit among everyone in the parish. Why? Because when a part—those who attend and receive—of an organic whole, which is what a parish is, an organism versus a machine—when a part flourishes the whole is benefited because the parish is a single living organism joined by a single root. An unusual characteristic of Aspens illustrates this idea: a thousand trees that appear like other trees to have individual roots in fact have only one. Therefore, the vigor or decline of one “tree” affects all the others. And so it is with a parish.

And the root is the spirit of the parish, and the spirit in a parish, just as in an individual, is where the Holy Spirit can come and dwell.

So let's start with some observations about the service of the Eucharist.

1. What is the service of the Eucharist?

Our liturgy make clear when we come to a service, we are participating in a “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving” to Our God; we are offering “our souls and bodies” instead of what the people of Israel offered which were sheep and goats and other animals, but these are sacrifices nevertheless and for some of the same purposes. However, there are other, perhaps even more significant differences: Jesus was and is our great high priest and also the ultimate sacrifice: he replaces the animal sacrifices. He presides over the Last Supper; he is also the sacrifice taken and consumed, “the sacrifice of his body and blood.” And we, you and I, duplicate his “work.” We also in one sense are priests at the service—members of the “priesthood of all believers” – and by witnessing and receiving the elements (consecrated by the ordained priest) we identify with Jesus at the Last Supper both as host as well as sacrifice, “offering up our souls and bodies” to the Lord.



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2. What happens to us in the service of the Eucharist subjectively?

Many of us—because we are fish swimming in the sea of the Enlightenment—and before that, the Reformation—in which miracles are dismissed as superstitions; and mysteries are only difficult questions waiting on rational answers—many of us find the idea of miracles or mysteries, difficult to accept. And a miracle is always a mystery. Another cause of this difficulty may be that we have been instructed to believe that miracles, assuming they were possible, took place in Christ’s day; or in the early years of the church, but that was then and this is now. They may have been needed then, to establish Jesus’ bonafides, and then those of His Church, but they are not needed now that Jesus as Lord and Bridegroom and the church as his Bride are well established—or at least familiar. As for mysteries—so many have been dispelled by the physical sciences surely this “explaining them away” will continue and eventually complete its task?

And yet; and yet. Does it in fact “make sense”; make rational sense to discount and dismiss miracles and mysteries? Does it make sense when every time we attend a communion service and witness and participate in the Eucharist, as fellow priest and shared sacrifice (“one bread, one body”) in imitation of Jesus, “our great high priest” and a “perfect sacrifice for the whole world” a miracle and a mystery take place in us?

“But look, the morn in russet mantle clad/walks o’er the dew of yon. high eastern hill.” (Hamlet 1, I, 166).

“But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?/ It is the east and Juliet is the sun!” (Romeo and Juliet, II,ii,1)

“Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day, stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.”

And this wonderful poetry of Shakespeare is only a faint echo, a metaphorical suggestion of the Real Thing of what happens in the Eucharist in us, which is the experience of the fresh start, the new beginning, the present taking wing, which our participation and reception of the Eucharist effects in us, resembling the emotional charge of witnessing the dawn on earth, but exceeding it to the nth degree, transcending it, because it is the “dawn from on high.”

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us.” Luke 1: 78.

“...there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new.” 2 Cor. 17 (b).

“Weeping may endure for a night/ But joy cometh in the morning.” Ps. 30:5 (b).”

Here is not “poetry” ~ even on a grand scale.



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Here is miracle— the dawn from on high, the new creation, joy—for those who believe, and also for those who only half, or only hopefully, believe; because the consecrated bread and wine have become the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the heavenly food and drink of new and unending life in him.

Does our conscious, rational mind take this in? Whether the answer is no, yes, or maybe, our spirit does, and we are changed, changed utterly, by being renewed—made new; our lives made new. We are a new creation. Life made new by being apprehend by renewed minds and hearts and spirits. Fresh starts, new beginning, the present taking wing—every time we receive in faith—truly a miracle!

And one reason I know this is true because I have observed your faithful reception of the consecrated host, and then, as you come up and I put the wafer in your hands, I see it in you.

There, I have finished. And now I'm going to sit down, and I hope we will have a discussion about this matter of the Eucharist. Perhaps you think what I have been saying about is hokum, or just wrong, or not what you think it true about it. I want to hear about your experience of the Eucharist, to hear what draws you to it, and what happens for you when you receive it.

Amen.