

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

Repetition is not always a bad thing. If you want to be sure that someone heard what you said, you repeat it. If you want someone to know that what you said is important, you repeat it. If you want to be sure that someone will remember what you said, you repeat it. Repetition can be a good thing. It can help you hammer home a point that you want to be sure people heard and that people will remember. Whether or not they understand what you said is a completely different story. Hearing and even remembering what you said is not the same as understanding what you said! Hang on to that thought.

Most of you know that before I entered seminary to prepare for the priesthood, I earned my living as a psychotherapist. I worked with individuals and I worked with families and I worked with couples. My favorite work was with couples. Listening to them talk to each other was a bit like learning a foreign language and then interpreting for each of them what had been said. I remember one exchange in particular in which a wife was complaining that her husband never said "I love you!" to her or gave her a compliment of any kind or ever said anything about her that was positive...to her or to anyone else. She was parched for positive information and affirmation from him. She was starving for some reassurance of her husband's affection for her. And the lack of any demonstration of affection or acknowledgement of his special feeling for her was the equivalent of not being fed emotionally. Her husband was a bit surprised by his wife's complaint and he reminded her that he had actually said, "I love you!" on her last birthday...which she was quick to point out was nearly a year ago. "Well," her husband replied, "nothing has changed. Why do I need to say it again?" I had to smile. And then I said to him, "You gave her something to eat almost a year ago. I think she's hungry again!" And then she and he both smiled.

This is the third Sunday in a row that our lectionary scriptures have presented us with passages about Jesus identifying himself as the Bread of Heaven...the source of the entry into eternal life. Three Sundays in a row is a lot of repetition. In the gospel of John, Jesus clearly says, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you." He doesn't just say, "You don't have eternal life." He says, "You have no life in you!" And then he says it again, in slightly different form, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." He tells it to us twice! And just in case we didn't get it the first two times, he says it a third time: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. The one who eats this bread will live forever" OK. We've heard it three times now...three times in the

same scripture passage. Not to mention that fact that this is the third Sunday in a row that we've heard something to this effect. Do we get it? Maybe. But quite possibly not. When we hear this passage in the gospel of John, we can understand why the early Christians were accused of cannibalism. That's exactly what this sounds like, but we know that Jesus is trying to explain an unfathomable mystery to us, not encourage us to take up a practice that is repugnant to most human beings.

So what is Jesus trying to tell us about what happens during the Holy Eucharist? It is our sacred meal. It is the meal that sustains and strengthens it. It is the table that we approach when we seek forgiveness and restoration with Jesus and with God. This is the meal that keeps us connected to Jesus. This is how Jesus asked us to remember Him. This is the meal through which we become a part of Jesus and Jesus becomes a part of us. In a way that we do not fully comprehend, we ingest the essence of Jesus and he resides within us. It is indeed a profound mystery. It is what connects us with Jesus Christ in the most intimate of ways...internally. We come to the communion rail to seek forgiveness for our sins and also to ask for strength for the journey of life. We know that we cannot do this alone. We know that we are too weak and too fragile to fend for ourselves in this world. We know that we need to have Jesus' presence within us in order to withstand all the temptations and the battles that we will face in this life. We know we cannot do it alone.

If these shocking words in this cannibalistic metaphor uttered by Jesus in the gospel of John mean anything in the life of the church, then at the very least they mean that when we eat and drink at the holy Table, eternity has broken into real time in a unique, unrepeatable way. Eternity keeps dipping into our finite time. Our memorial feast of bread and wine recreated at Jesus' direction joins us with the living Christ...who is forever. And because we are joined to him we have entered into eternity as well, even as we continue to live and breathe in this life. At the table of the Holy Eucharist, Jesus becomes a part of us as we become a part of Him in giving up our own will and deferring to him. We never leave the Holy Table determined to have our own way.

Our mortal life is difficult at best even when everything is going well. We get hungry. We are discouraged. We are remorseful and contrite. Sometimes we feel lost or set adrift. We get frustrated and we wrestle with our anger. We lose sight of the love of Jesus Christ and the great compassion of God. We need to be reminded because our memories are short and our fears are persistent. We need to be fed...and fed often...like the married woman who longed to hear "I love you!" from her husband far more frequently than she did. God knows we need to be fed and Jesus provides the table and the meal that will replenish us. We need to be reminded...and reminded often...that we are the beloved children of God...the One who knows every hair on

our head and the One who is more devoutly interested in our welfare than we can possibly imagine.

On some level each of us yearns for eternity. We hold tightly to this life as if it were the only life we think we will ever have. Our faith needs to be replenished regularly and the promise of eternity needs to be repeated to us often. We come to the table of the Lord with our wounds and our worries; our broken hearts and our discontent; our fears as well as our hopes. Those of us who have been conditioned to think through cool, detached, distant, and dispassionate consideration will find it strange to be told that if we are to think about the Word made flesh, we must think through ingestion, consumption, and intimate, deep engagement. There is no knowing who the Christ is without visceral, total engagement. We will not be able to comprehend him by sitting back, comfortable in the pew, and coolly considering him as if he were an abstract, disembodied idea. Incarnation means we have to get up, come forward, hold out our empty hands, sip wine, and chew bread. Jesus is that real and that present.

This theology of the Holy Eucharist covers everything in the entirety of creation. Jesus has come in human form to be with us and in doing so has proven to us that God wants all of us...and he wants us all. This is a God who is so scandalously and so intimately available to us that he has provided for our continual nourishment in the remembrance of his Son, Jesus. Whoever knows this and understands this knows how to live forever and has already entered into eternal life even while continuing in this life.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.