

Rohana's Reflection  
Eating Living Bread  
What Does Such a Community Look Like?  
How Does Communion Connect with Community?  
August 12, 2012

**Scripture Readings**

*Whether you take what is written in the Bible as fact, metaphor or story, listen to these words now, for the meaning they hold for you this day.*

**1 Kings 19: 1 - 8**

*The faith story of the Hebrew people was familiar to the people of Jesus day. We will hear how the author of the gospel of John used these familiar images in today's gospel reading.*

**Psalm 34 VU p. 761**

*The psalmist teaches believers how to act to please God.*

**Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

*Paul described what a community who lived on the Bread of Life looked like.*

**John 6:35-51**

*John's image of eating Jesus was his way of talking about personal commitment and involvement in the new Jesus movement. People were asked to consume his very being to be part of the community.*

**T**oday's texts offer an opportunity for us to further explore the challenging issues in the Christian practice of communion. At the heart of the problem for people in Jesus' day, and in ours, is the language used in the gospel of John describing Jesus as living bread, sent by God, assuring that "whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh".

**Are Christians literally eating Jesus' body when they eat bread during communion? Or is this meant to be metaphorical language? Or are there other explanations? How do we make sense of the sacrament of communion?**

Some would say, don't even try, just experience the mystery! Others only accept communion as a memorial meal because Jesus said 'do this in memory of me'. Still others connect communion to what they believe is the Christian responsibility: to remember with gratitude how Jesus' body was broken and blood was shed to save believers from their sins. Memorial meal, mystery, atonement for sins, or meaningless ritual, what do you believe?

I am going to share some background to today's text in order to help us continue our exploration.

First it is helpful to be aware that much of what is written in the new Testament was

influenced by the Old Testament, (what we now prefer to call the “Hebrew Scriptures”). The authors spoke about Jesus using language they believed people would understand, using familiar stories and images. As an example, I refer to this morning’s text from 1 Kings, with an engaging story about how King Ahab and Jezebel had killed all the prophets and were after the prophet Elijah. Elijah fled into the wilderness, prepared to die. But an angel brought him food, a cake and water, and told him to eat the food that would sustain him for a long journey. Similar to the story of God sending manna and quails to keep the people from starvation, God sent food, through an angel, to Elijah.

This is background to the text from the author of John. Written over 100 years after Jesus died, it was written for a community in conflict with a local Jewish synagogue. A sociological reading helps us to understand the context and the aim of the author to convert unbelievers. The author has Jesus preaching in good rabbinic fashion to unbelievers who knew the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus told the people that the manna given to their ancestors fed them for a time, yet they died. If they understood him as living bread, and ate of him, they would live forever.

In our time we would use different language. We wouldn’t suggest that people should eat Jesus. We wouldn’t tell the Jewish people that they would not have eternal life because we accept that many religions are ways to God. John believed Jews would only be saved through Jesus and through taking communion. His references to the bread of life are Eucharistic language, words used in communion liturgies.

We in fact would probably be sympathetic to the Jewish people who were grumbling

(notice the use of the same word ‘grumbling’, used in the Hebrew scriptures for the people who were hungry in the wilderness before God sent them manna to eat). We too, might wonder, how can Jesus be the bread that comes down from heaven if we all knew Jesus as the son of Joseph whose father and mother we also knew? How could he be bread come down from heaven?

I found it helpful to read the comments of process theologian Mary Ricketts who wrote the following about John’s use of the image of eating Jesus:

*“It was a way of talking about personal commitment and involvement in the new Jesus movement...This new way of life was so radical and so dependant on understanding Jesus as the one who illuminates God’s way that one must consume his very being to be a part of the community”.*

Now we have four ways of understanding communion 1. memorial meal 2.mystery 3.atonement for sins 4. becoming one with Jesus.

Those early Christians had experienced that Jesus was central to knowing God. Jesus had become the conduit to hearing and learning from God. Jesus was offering the non-believers a relationship with God that would sustain them in ways they were not being nourished. That way was to be part of a community, a people called “people of the way” before they became known as Christians.

People did not think of themselves as individuals in the way we do in our time. In fact, we are not isolated individuals, as Jesus tries to explain. “We are One” is a great spiritual truth, we are interconnected with one another, with Jesus and with God.

How do we talk about that reality? We use language of metaphor and community and the sacraments of baptism and communion.

Those who put our lectionary texts together used Paul's letter to the Ephesians to help us to better understand the language of community.

*“Our reading from the letter to the Ephesians” writes Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey “invites us to think about what it means to be not just a name of the rolls of a congregation but a living, breathing, ‘whole and holy’ follower of Jesus, with our hearts and minds and entire selves converted-transformed by giving our lives over to God in Jesus Christ.”*

This letter invites us to walk our talk. If we are truly transformed people, in relationship to God through Jesus, it will show. Paul's letter shows us what a community that lived on the Bread of Life looked like in the first century. They knew they were connected. Paul wrote in vs. 25 “we are members of one another”. Therefore they were to speak the truth to one another, not let the sun go down on their anger, not make room for the devil, give up stealing and work honestly with their own hands, share what they had with those in need, not speak evil talk, put away bitterness, wrangling, slander and gossip and “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ had forgiven them.

Paul's advice to the Ephesians holds well for us today. I learned that the Greek word for kindness is “Chrestos”, reminding us of Christ. He is our model, as Paul wrote, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us. Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “When I was young I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people.”

Paul told the Ephesians if they knew themselves as members of a body, how can they be at war with one another, outwardly or underneath the surface and behind one another's backs? The same applies to us today, if we truly belong to one another and to the Body of Christ, we cannot hurt one another with angry words and actions.

We have opportunities and challenges to practice living in community in our families, our neighbourhoods and our wider community. Being in a community of faith offers further challenge as well as further opportunities for love and acceptance. Now that we are a shared ministry we will be working even more closely with another Christian community, the local Anglican church. Let us remember, especially when we have difficult issues, that we are all interconnected through Christ.

Let us be mindful of the blessings of being part of the body of Christ in the world.

William Pickens, in 1932 said *“Living together is an art”*.

Wendell Berry, also in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century said, *“Healing is impossible in loneliness, it is the opposite of loneliness. Conviviality is healing. To be healed we must come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation.”*

Dorothy Day 20<sup>th</sup> Century activist said, *“We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”*

How community connects to communion is described well by Paul Stroble in the Christian Century who used the term “The Jesus Diet” He wrote:

***When our lives are fed by Jesus' living bread we begin to look like those described by Paul in Ephesians. We attend to our words. We manage our anger. We work not only for our own needs but are mindful of other's needs and we respond to them. We encourage and forgive one another. We put away "bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling slander and malice" and pattern our lives on God's attitude to us as demonstrated by Jesus. We are nourished by 'fruits of the spirit'. This is a good picture of a person or community nourished by Christ and prepared by the Holy Spirit".***

***Let us Pray:***

**Creator God, as we grow and mature into the creation you envisioned, we become more certain that it is community that makes us strong. Through the language that calls Jesus 'bread of life' we focus on our involvement in and commitment to Christian community. Help us to better understand what it means to be a community that is nourished by Jesus, the Bread of Life. Amen.**

