

*Sermon for Christ Church, August 16, 2009, 11 Pentecost, Year B
John 6:51-58; Eating and Believing; by Rev. John W. Perry*

Today's Gospel reading is, of course, all about the Eucharist. I want to speak today about some of what may be going on, when we come up to receive this sacrament.

It is human nature, that we tend to keep significant parts of ourselves in reserve. This is true, I think, for many of the aspects of our lives. In our jobs, for instance -- they occupy a certain portion of our time, but often there are things about us that our co-workers or bosses never know; things we keep in reserve. And this is appropriate. Similarly, when we join a club or group, doing with others something we like to do, there still are parts of ourselves we do not share, in that setting. I suppose this is especially true when we are newer in a thing; newer in a relationship, we tend to share less.

When we first join a church, or when we first start attending, there surely is much we hold in reserve. This is natural; it makes sense. In keeping with my role as priest, I do hope over time, people grow more comfortable here; and share a little more of who you are. But we're human beings, and we're all different, have different needs and personalities, different senses of where our boundaries lie. And this, too, is appropriate.

But in another aspect of our lives -- the one having to do with faith -- I think it is less a matter of differing styles, than it is about differing stages of a journey. Regardless of what we're comfortable sharing with other human beings, when it comes to **God**, I believe we are all on a *journey*, into committing *more* of ourselves. Holding less in reserve.

At certain times in my life, I have been reminded of a particular line, from a song. The song is called The Ways of Man; it's by the Maine folksinger, Gordon Bok. The line I am thinking of has to do with the limits of what a fishing boat can do; it has to do with **our** limitations, really. The line says, "Well, I've got no more to give you." I have thought of that line, at times when God seemed to be asking more of me. Wanting to stretch me. And I haven't wanted to go. And somehow that line would come into my head, and something other than my own will, would get hold of me, and turn the line around; and it would come out, "Well, there's always more to give you." So I'd find myself saying to God; very quietly: "There's always more to give you." And the funny thing is, having said it, one discovers, that it is true. There actually is, always more, we can give to God. Always more of ourselves, deep inside; more of who we really are, that we can share with God.

This has to do with the Eucharist. With the bread that Jesus gives; as it says in John's Gospel, the gift of his own flesh.

The Eucharist is not a 'magic cookie.' The Gospel makes no claim, that it has any magical power, to somehow keep us from ever dying. And yet we're told we will have life, because of it.

The key to understanding this, has to do with a verse in John's Gospel that comes before today's passage. Just a few verses back, while saying he is the bread of life, Jesus also says "whoever **believes** has eternal life" (John 6:47). Biblical scholar Raymond Brown writes that this verse, in

conjunction with today's passage, means that "the gift of life comes through a believing reception of the sacrament." This is about belief -- *our* belief -- not any inherent magical powers.

So let's look at this notion of belief. The Christian community that existed, where and when John's Gospel was written, was a beleaguered community. It was an us-against-them world, and there were a lot more of *them* than there were of *us*. So as you might expect, a great deal of importance was placed on loyalty. It was *loyalty*, to the group, and especially to the founder of that group and to its founding vision, that would keep them alive, that would give them life.

To *believe*, for them -- to have belief -- *meant*, to have loyalty to Jesus.

It was not a matter of believing in some doctrinal or theoretical proposition. Like, for example, whether or not one today believes in the theory of evolution. That's a different meaning of the word, 'belief' -- and that's the way we commonly understand it now. No, this was something else. This was belief, in the sense of a conscious choice one made, to align one's self, with a certain way of seeing the world -- a set of values -- that one had from this person Jesus. This kind of belief, was belief *into* Jesus. Belief was loyalty, *to this person*. It was loyalty, to these values, to this vision. This was something to live by. Something to give yourself to.

I invite you, to think of belief, in this same way, now. Belief, as loyalty. As something to give yourself to. As a journey you're on, of giving more of yourself, over to these values. Holding less of yourself, in reserve.

Loyalty is a thing that gives us life. I myself have received this gift of life, many times over, because I am part of a group of people who have chosen to give their loyalty, to this person Jesus, and to all he stands for. I have received this gift of life, not only from Jesus -- but also from you. Or perhaps I have received it, from Jesus, *through* you.

So on one hand we have this natural inclination to keep significant parts of ourselves, in reserve. We've learned to do that. And on the other hand, we have Jesus saying, 'eat my flesh.' Meaning, 'believe into me.' Choose, to have more loyalty, give more of yourself, to what I stand for. This, too, is something we can learn to do. As part of our journey.

New life, comes, as we express more of this kind of belief; this kind of loyalty. Perhaps because we've found a deeper, more enduring motivation. Perhaps because we find it reflected, from those others, on the same journey.

So when you come forward for communion today, take another step in your journey of belief. As you stretch out your hands, think of yourself as giving up to God, perhaps a little more, of what you may have been holding in reserve. Like it says in that version of the song: 'There's always more to give you.' And then receive, along with His body, the gift of life. Amen.