

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

August 16, 2015; the 12th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58.

To Eat the Bread and Drink the Wine

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Every time that we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, have a service with communion, we distribute the bread saying, "The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven."

What are we saying when we say that?

What does it really mean and why does it matter?

When we distribute the wine, we say "The Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation."

What does that mean?

What can it mean for us and for the world?

In a very real way, Episcopalians have an "altar call" every Sunday.

We come forward to receive and in this act, we demonstrate our faith, faith that does not claim absolute knowledge or understanding, but having faith that we will meet God here...that God's grace will be given to us, we know not how...not exactly.

Oh, there are a number of explanations of what is going on when the community gathers, the gifts are brought forward, and the priest says the words of "institution."

Keith Thomas notes in his book *Religion and the Decline of*

Magic states that many, when the priest would say the

works of institution in Latin, *Hoc est corpus meum*, this is my

body, people thought it was magic, and this is where we can the phrase “hocus pocus.”

Keith Thomas’ book is about the “magical beliefs held by people on every level of English society in the 16th and 17th centuries...”¹

Back then people thought it was magic and they believed.

Today, some people who don’t come to church often dismiss the church as having “magical thinking;” that it is not real.

What is happening to the bread and wine in this service?

I think it is beyond anything we can understand, almost as if it is existing in a dimension that we cannot see--but we sense it, there is something about it...it gives us grounding, while at the same time, raising us to heaven, connecting us with heaven, with all the saints in heaven and on earth.

Of course the Episcopal Church does have a sound theology of the sacrament of communion: we believe in what we call the “real presence,”

that Christ is truly present to us in the bread and the wine, and that it is the action of the Eucharist, the entire liturgy (liturgy means ‘the work of the people’), that makes this so through God’s grace.

The words of Institution are essential, “this is my Body, this is my Blood,” but so is the gathered community, and all the prayer that surrounds our experience here today.

This why an Episcopal priest will not celebrate the Eucharist by his or herself; we can’t celebrate in that way because we believe we can’t celebrate alone.

When was the last time that you had a great celebration by yourself of any kind?

At least one other person must be there for an Episcopal priest to

¹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons: 1971, back cover.

celebrate the Eucharist.

And in fact, here at Holy Comforter we make that point by calling me the presider, rather than the Celebrant, because we are all celebrants. To learn more about what we in the Episcopal Church believe, join me for Episcopal 101, on Wednesdays, for four weeks, beginning the last week of September.²

We believe in “the real presence” but we do not define that in one way for all.

Some believe in transubstantiation - that the bread and wine become that actual body and blood of Christ, some believe in consubstantiation, that the both the are present, bread and wine, and the body and blood, and there are those who believe that the bread and wine are pure symbol for the body and blood.

And some don't want to define it...leaving a lot room for the mystery to be revealed.

I've been thinking about these matters recently in the context of the new service we are starting: ***Story Time***, a service for children, their families, and friends of all ages.

We will hold this service every week starting October 4th, at 4:30pm. We will tell a story from the Bible, and every week we will tell the story of the last supper.

Because we will consecrate the bread and wine for this service in the morning, we will have the freedom to tell the story without using any formulaic language.

I'm working on exactly what I will say, but it will be something like:
On the night Jesus was having dinner with his friends, and he knew that he had to leave them soon, he wanted to teach them how

² We will meet in the parlor for Episcopal 101 from 7pm to 8pm on September 30, October 7, 14, and 21. All are welcome. Please consider attending, especially if you are new to Holy Comforter. It is also a great way to get to know a small group of people.

to stay connected to him, and God, his Father/Mother. So Jesus did two things that night, he showed them how to care for each other and others by washing their feet, and he took bread and gave it to them and said that he would be there for his friends in the bread and wine and to remember him in this way. And friends weren't exactly sure what he meant, but when they tried it, they knew he was with them...and so do we. As his friends continued to follow Jesus, by living as he did, they received strength for life when they gathered together, sang, said prayers, and shared the bread and wine...and so do we.

So you get the idea of what I'm planning for the 4:30pm service, and also how I hope to help children understand communion, what it is, what it means...and maybe some adults will get something from that too, and the other wonderful stories of God's love that we will tell. We have no age requirement for receiving communion, which means that a very young child is welcome to receive. Understanding is not a requirement...how many of us would say that we fully understand? But we can do some teaching for children, and I will offer communion instruction for children next Sunday following the service, and more can be provided if desired by parents.

Some understanding is certain good, but, the act of receiving communion, does itself form us and transform us and give us grace, whether we understand it or not. As well, those who cannot receive for whatever reason, through faith and desire also receive the same grace...and powerful grace it is.

Brian C. Taylor in his book, *Becoming Christ, Transformation Through Contemplation*, urges us not to see communion as a "spiritual vitamin," but rather as, "an actual physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual encounter with Jesus in the here and now....He becomes

us, and we become him, *Abide in me, and I in you*, he said.”³
 Taylor goes on to write: “What comes of this encounter?
 Of course Jesus will give us comfort and healing when needed.
 But he will also lead us into transformation of life, which can include pain,
 paradox, struggle, and unknowing mystery.”⁴

It is not magic; it is not that easy; yes, God’s grace is freely given...and
 sometimes it might feel easy to live this Christian life, but at other
 times the strength that we have been given, is needed to let
 Christ live in us, and through us, when that is not easy.
 The saints who we remember in the Church were not perfect people, of
 course, but they listened for God’s call in the circumstances of their
 lives, and answered it, as best they could.

Today across the Diocese of VA and in many other places, we are
 remembering a young man who followed the Way of Jesus, in giving
 his body, his life, as a sacrifice for another and for justice.
 Our bishop, Shannon Johnston, wrote a letter to the clergy urging us to
 remember Jonathan on this day, saying:

“August 20 of this year marks the 50th anniversary of the martyrdom of
 Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a seminary student at the Episcopal
 Theological School in Cambridge, Mass. Jonathan was killed in
 the streets of Hayneville, Ala., at the height of the strife during the
 Civil Rights Movement, while protecting a 17-year-old black woman,
 Ruby Sales, from a shotgun blast meant for her.”⁵

Strengthened by the Body and Blood of Jesus, Jonathan was able to give
 himself, and it was in the midst of life, in the midst of the racist
 hatred and the kindness of a four-year old African-American
 girl, that Jesus’ story came alive in Jonathan, and
 Jonathan in Jesus in an intense way.

³ Brian C. Taylor, *Becoming Christ, Transformation Through Contemplation*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 2002, p. 86.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87

⁵ <http://www.thediocese.net/news/newsView.asp?NewsId=40968425>

Such is what I perceived when I read newspaper article⁶ written by Jonathan and published after his death by *The Texas Observer*; it spoke to me of Brian Taylor's words, "He becomes us, and we become him...."

In the article Jonathan writes: "Death at the heart of life, and life in the midst of death. The tree of life is indeed the cross."

And he describes the the 4 year-old girl (Christ living in her), giving him a kiss and touching his face, of that moment quoting Stringfellow, Jonathan said, "that is called a sacrament."

The world is the sacrament in which the sacraments that we celebrate here really make sense.

As we consider how Christ lives in us and we in him, we conclude with a prayer written for one person, whose life made that sort of communion visible to us in a powerful way.

O God of justice and compassion, who put down the proud and the mighty from their place, and lift up the poor and afflicted: We give you thanks for your faithful witness Jonathan Myrick Daniels, who, in the midst of injustice and violence, risked and gave his life for another; and we pray that we, following his example, may make no peace with oppression; through Jesus Christ the just one: who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

⁶ http://www.episcopalarchives.org/Afro-Anglican_history/exhibit/pdf/Escru_JD_54myheartisblack.pdf *The Texas Observer*, October 29, 1965.