

**Sermon Preached August 23, 2015**  
**Year B, Proper 16**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church**  
**Beverly Farms, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

“My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.” Amen. [Psalm 84:1b].

In February my family and I took our annual trip to Atlanta to visit with Bill's family: his siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews. While there, a group of us took a sight-seeing trip to CNN headquarters. Among other things we walked through the process of creating a news broadcast. In one room we were shown how a “green screen” works. Two little girls in the tour were invited down to stand in front of a large green panel. We could see them standing there, both in reality, but also on the TV screen. The tour guide then put silly backgrounds on the TV screen, which made it look like the girls were being chased by tigers, or flying across the mountains. Yet, of course, as we watched them in reality, they were just two girls moving around on the floor in front of a green panel. Then the tour guide gave one girl a large green cloth and covered her in it so that only her head was exposed. We then laughed as we looked at the TV screen, because the cloth made her body disappear allowing her head to look like it was floating in the air. She could even completely disappear, like Harry Potter's invisibility cloak, by covering her whole self with the cloth. Or she could then throw off the green cloth, which on the TV made it look like she had suddenly appeared out of thin air. This revealing reminds of what happens in the Eucharist.

For the past three weeks we have been listening to Jesus' discourse about bread in the sixth chapter of John. This final section is particularly strong. When he says, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," the word in Greek used for "eat" is a particular word generally used for animals. "Gnaw" might be a better translation.<sup>1</sup> Like when I watch my dog Charlie gnaw his bone. Jesus is saying "those who gnaw on my flesh and drink my blood..." Ewww! It sounds really quite revolting, cannibalistic even! This is particularly striking when we bear in mind that in the book of Deuteronomy it specifically forbids Israelites from consuming blood. Therefore Jesus' followers are scandalized by his teaching that he is bread, that they are to gnaw on him, and drink his blood. Many walk away from Jesus at this point. I once had a parishioner who was equally scandalized by this passage and said he absolutely refused to believe Jesus would've asked this of us. He said he believed the Bible is wrong, the act Jesus suggests is "vampirish," and he refused from then on to ever receive communion. Jesus is not sugar-coating or spiritualizing this teaching, he is being intentionally provocative. For some reason Jesus is lifting up this very fleshy, material act as important.

Yet a couple of verses later Jesus seems to be backtracking when he says, "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless." [John 6:63]. If the flesh is useless, then why the big fuss about the importance of gnawing flesh? Some Christians have interpreted this passage to mean that Jesus doesn't really mean what he says about eating, that the statement about useless flesh proves he is opposed to the material world. That all matter is evil. Some Christians believe we should in fact punish our physical human body, believing that that will somehow make us more 'spiritual.' And if the material world is evil, then communion, when we eat Christ's body and blood, is somehow not really Jesus or not really material. Rather communion is just a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/08/scandalizing-words-are-life-giving-words.html>, 8/22/15

remembrance of an event long past, or that the material was changed to something spiritual, because, of course, the material world is useless.

Richard Rohr addresses this apparent dichotomy regarding spirit and flesh noting that the Greek word “sarx,” translated as “flesh,” would be better translated as “ego” or what he calls our “small self.” So in our gospel today we would have “It is the spirit that gives life, the ego is useless.”

Rohr says, “Basically, spirit is the whole self, the Christ self that we fall into by grace.[that is what gives life] .... The problem is not between body and spirit; it’s between part and whole... ‘sarx’ [what is translated as flesh, what Rohr translates as ego] is the separate self, the partial self, the entrapped self, the false self. It’s the self that is trying to define itself apart from the Spirit, apart from the Big Self. It’s you apart from God, the tiny self that you think you are, who takes yourself far too seriously and who is always needy and wanting something else. ... The problem is not that you have a body; the problem is that you think you are separate from others.”<sup>2</sup>

What he is saying here is that the false self, our ego, is our misconception of who we think we are while we are in this body, in this life, in this flesh. And this ego is useless, not the flesh. On the contrary, the flesh, the material world, including us, is quite wonderful; the spirit is found in the physical, in his body, in our body, in bread and wine.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://stjohnsquamish.ca/richard-rohr-flesh-spirit/>, 8/22/15

Over and over again in the scriptures we are told that the material world is good. It is valuable. It is precious to God because God made it. So precious that God entered into the creation, the material world, in order to communicate more directly with us.

The truth is we are much more than an small self in a fleshy body. In the words of the Jesuit mystic Teilhard de Chardin, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”<sup>3</sup> We are Spirit connected to a larger reality. When Jesus introduces us to communion, he is trying to remind us of this. When we celebrate Eucharist it like when the cloth over the little girl in front of the green screen is suddenly pulled away, revealing that she was there all along. She had been invisible, but when the cloth fell, we could see the truth of her presence.

When we celebrate communion, it isn't that magic is infused into the bread and wine making it holy, rather, that it was holy all along and communion simply reveals this truth. The green cloth is dropped. Jesus tells us to munch and gnaw on this physical bread and wine, made of the same stuff as his physical body. God who is spirit can also be physical, and when we consume this communion bread and wine, we know that God is part of us and we are part of God. That the spiritual can be grasped through that which is material. Munching on the Eucharist opens our eyes.

And if the physical world is good, and contains the spiritual, and we are spiritual beings, then that means that we too are glorious! You are precious and part of the larger mystery of God. Thomas Merton once noted, “There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5387.Pierre\\_Teilhard\\_de\\_Chardin?page=2](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5387.Pierre_Teilhard_de_Chardin?page=2), 8/22/15

shining like the sun.... If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time.”<sup>4</sup> Munching on the Eucharist opens our eyes.

If we could sustain this knowledge to beyond Sunday morning, we could see all people and all things for who they really are, beloved of God. The green screen, the ego, the small self, would have no more power to obscure their wonder. We could walk through and recognize the beauty in everyone. When that annoying co-worker starts blathering on to you about nothing, you can now see beyond the lack of self-worth, and hidden fear, to the sparkling jewel that they are in God’s eyes, and find patience.

When an angry neighbor yells and complains to you about some perceived slight, you can now see beyond their small self which cries out for acknowledgement, to their magnificent true self they are in God, and find compassion.

Sin only arises when we operate as though the ego is paramount, as though we are separate from God and each other. But we are not. We are one in Christ Jesus. We are connected. Munching on the Eucharist opens our eyes. The green cloth falls, the invisibility cloak drops, and we see the Holy has been there all along. Amen.

Merton says, “We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and the divine is shining through it all the time.”

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<sup>4</sup> <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--False-Self-and-True-Self--Part-I.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=ekpGIUG2V0Q>, 8/22/15.

“Matter is spirit moving slowly enough to be seen.”

— Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

“By virtue of Creation, and still more the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.”

— Pierre Teilhard de Chardin