

Corpus Christi
1 Cor. 11:23-29; John 6:47-58

Bread Made Flesh*

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In the year 1208, a sixteen-year-old nun from Belgium named Juliana of Liege had a vision in her dreams. She saw a brightly-lit moon in the sky. But the moon was missing a section, just as a pie might be missing a slice. This vision came to her over and over again, until she realized that it was a revelation from God.

Juliana came to understand that the moon represented the church, and the missing section represented a missing feast day from the church's calendar: one that focused solely on the Holy Eucharist. Although the institution of the Eucharist was commemorated each year on Maundy Thursday, that day also focused on foot washing and the stripping of the altar. Thus, there was no feast day that was dedicated solely to the Body and Blood of Christ.

Juliana of Liege spent the rest of her life advocating for such a feast day. Although she did not live to see it established, the Feast of Corpus Christi – which is Latin for the “Body of Christ” – was established as a universal feast day just over a century later, in 1317, by Pope John XXII.

Corpus Christi is a particularly Anglo-Catholic feast day. As someone who has high church sensibilities and who grew up in the Roman Catholic church, I love the fact that we celebrate this feast day each year.

But if you look at the official calendar of the Episcopal Church at the beginning of the Book of Common Prayer, you will not find Corpus Christi listed anywhere. Rather, it is only referenced indirectly – and, in fact, it is buried on page 201 of the prayer book – under the mysterious heading of “Of the Holy Eucharist.” So what happened?

In the late Middle Ages, Corpus Christi was a huge feast day. There were elaborate processions of the Holy Eucharist throughout towns and villages. There were also theatrical performances of religious-themed plays. One of these cycles, the York Corpus Christi plays, lasted for nearly two hundred years and was described by one medievalist as the “most lavish, long-lasting, and complex form of collective theatrical enterprise in English theater history.”

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But the Feast of Corpus Christi was abolished by the Church of England in 1548. Why? Because it was too dangerous. The Protestant reformers rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation – that is, the bread and wine literally becoming the Body and Blood of Christ – because of the dangers of idolatry.

The Protestant Reformation challenged the core Roman Catholic belief that the ritual sacrifice of the mass could, in the words of another medievalist, turn “bread into flesh” and that “a [small] disc of baked wheaten dough could embody the saving body of Christ.”

(A few years ago, there was a satirical news headline that said: “Vatican reeling as DNA tests show that communion wafers contain 0% Christ.” DNA tests, of course, are beside the point. Transubstantiation is a theological notion, and not a biological one.)

In any event, today’s Gospel text from John is a reminder of just how transgressive the Holy Eucharist is. Our Episcopal ears are accustomed to hearing phrases such as “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.” We automatically translate that language into the language of the Eucharist.

But think about how strange and threatening that language might be for those who are unfamiliar with Christian liturgy. Indeed, Christians in the early church were accused of practicing cannibalism and child sacrifice. There is something profoundly unsettling about eating the “bread made Flesh” and drinking the “wine made Blood.”

The bottom line, however, is that the Episcopal Church *does* believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. According to the Prayer Book’s Catechism, the Body and Blood of Christ is truly present at Holy Communion. But, in typical Anglican fashion, we are silent about the “how.” Some things are better left to the realm of mystery.

In addition to Corpus Christi, today is another special day on the church’s calendar: Anglican Communion Sunday. The Anglican Communion, of which the Episcopal Church is one of 44 member churches, has designated the Sunday closest to May 26th as a day to reflect upon the gift of the Anglican Communion.

It’s appropriate that we’ve been reflecting upon the Body of Christ, or Corpus Christi, this morning, since that notion is also central to ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul not only talks about the Body of Christ in the context of the Last Supper (which we heard in today’s epistle reading), but also as a symbol of the broader church.

Paul notes that, just as a human body has many parts, so does the church. And each part is critical for the functioning of the whole. Just as the head cannot say to the foot, “I have no need of you,” one part of the church cannot say to another, “I have no need of you.”

There has been a lot of controversy over the last two decades about the relationship between the Episcopal Church and the broader Anglican Communion, especially over the consecration of women and LGBT bishops and same-sex marriage. The conversation has been heated on both sides of the debate, with both sides saying at times “I have no need of you.” The West accuses the Global South of sexism and homophobia. And the Global South accuses the West of colonialism and racism.

The real danger, however, lies in fragmentation of the Body of Christ. Like the moon that is missing a slice in Juliana of Liege’s visions, the body of the Anglican Communion cannot function effectively without all of its members. Closer to home, where would the Little Church be if the Episcopal Church didn’t recognize the ministry of clergy from the Anglican Church of Australia such as Bishop Andrew and Father Ron?

As we reflect today upon the Feast of Corpus Christi and the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, I invite us also to reflect upon the Body of Christ and the mystery of the broader church. May we never say to one another, “I have no need of you,” whether it is on the level of the parish, the diocese, the province, or the communion.

Let us also give thanks today for the gift of the Holy Eucharist. Let us give thanks today for the gift of the Anglican Communion. In both, we find the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven, as well as the Blood of Christ, the Cup of Salvation.