

Sermon for Sunday, Aug. 12, 2018 (Proper 14, Year B)
The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA
The Reverend Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

Two weeks ago, we began reading through chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, and will continue in that chapter for two more weeks. Five total weeks spent in this one chapter! It's rare that the lectionary gives us that much time to focus on one particular passage of scripture, so to me that says it's worth taking the time to look at this chapter more closely.

It began two weeks ago with the Feeding of the 5,000, and then last week we heard about crowds following Jesus asking for signs, even though he'd just performed this amazing miracle in their midst! In responding to them, he tells them that they should not seek after "food that perishes," like the bread and fish they ate on the hillside, but "for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

He then begins a long discourse about the "bread of life" and the "bread from heaven," saying that he is the bread of life and people must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life. The church has generally understood this discourse to be an extended theological reflection on the Eucharist, the ritual meal Jesus's followers observed after his death that became the central act of the church's worship.

So I'd like to take some time to review our church's teaching about the Eucharist, and then examine what John 6 has to say to one of the most pressing issues in the church today regarding communion: the question of who is allowed to receive it – should communion be open to all people, or is it meant only for baptized Christians?

Think of this as a "teaching" more than a sermon – that's why I'm back here behind the pulpit, in a little more formal presentation than usual today.

To fully cover this subject, I'm going to need more time than I have in any one sermon, so this will be a two-part teaching – and you'll have to come back next week for the conclusion!

First, let's begin with the Episcopal Church's teaching on the Eucharist.

Although the Episcopal Church is famous for shying away from formal, doctrinal statements and allowing room for a variety of interpretations and understandings in her midst, the Book of Common Prayer is a good place to start in trying to nail down the church's teaching on any one topic. After all, the prayer book was approved by two successive General Conventions, and thus represents the common mind of the church – at least, the mind of the church in 1979, when it was ratified.

Most instructive is the one sentence at the top of page 298 in the prayer book, the information “Concerning the Service” of Holy Baptism:

“Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.”

So, we believe that baptism is the only thing one needs to do to join the body of Christ, the church, and that once someone is baptized, they can't be “unbaptized.” You can't lose or negate your baptism. In the liturgy, the person who is baptized is told, “**You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.**”

The Catechism in the back of the prayer book teaches that the Eucharist is “**the sacrament commanded by Christ for the continual remembrance of his life, death, and resurrection, until his coming again,**” and that in the Eucharist, “**the sacrifice of Christ is made present, and ... he unites us to his one offering of himself,**” and that the benefits we receive in Holy Communion are “**the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life.**” (BCP 859-860)

What does the Catechism mean when it says that in the Eucharist Christ “unites us to his one offering of himself?”

In ancient Israelite practice, there was a tradition of slaughtering an animal as a sacrifice for sin. The early church saw in Jesus's death a parallel to the atoning sacrifice ritual, and proclaimed that Jesus's death was a sacrifice for sin that eliminated the need for all animal sacrifice. His one act of dying on the cross accomplished forgiveness for all time and thus made it unnecessary to repeat the act of animal sacrifice. By being united to Christ's offering of

himself, then, we receive the benefits of the forgiveness of sin that comes as a result of that sacrifice.

The early church also saw in Jesus's death a parallel to the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, a sacrifice that was not an atonement for sin, but an expression of faith and trust. In the story of the Exodus, the Hebrew people sacrificed a lamb and spread the blood on the doorposts of their homes as a sign for God to "pass over" their homes when he went through Egypt killing all the firstborn sons and animals in an attempt to convince the Egyptians to free the Israelites from slavery. The people did this thing because God had commanded it, and in doing so, trusted that God would keep God's word to protect them. Thus, the sacrifice of Passover is a sacrifice of obedience and trust, a proclamation of faith in God. In this theological perspective, when we are "united with Christ's offering of himself," we become part of Jesus's act of obedience and trust in God by remaining faithful to God even when it cost him his life.

Part of the reason this connection was made was because Jesus was killed in Jerusalem around the time of Passover, when the story of the Exodus from Egypt was retold and remembered among the Jewish people. Most scholars believe that Jesus's "Last Supper" with the disciples was, in fact, the *seder*, the Passover meal. Thus, in many ways, the Eucharist is the liturgical descendant of the Passover.

So, with all of that background to set the stage, let's turn to the debate over who is allowed to receive communion, more commonly known as the "open communion" debate.

It's worth mentioning that the term "open communion" has been used to mean different things throughout history. Earlier in the 20th century, it was used to refer to allowing Christians to receive communion in another church that was not of their denomination – in other words, allowing a Presbyterian Christian or a Methodist Christian to receive communion in an Episcopal church. This was an inclusive move at a time in which many churches would only allow official members of their church to receive communion, and a step toward recovering some sense of Christian unity, to be able to share in the Eucharist together.

In the current debate, "open communion" refers to the practice of inviting ALL people – regardless of whether or not they are baptized Christians – to

receive communion. The current official stance of the Episcopal church on this issue, according to our canon law, is that **“no unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this church.”** (Canon 1.17.7)

And yet, many Episcopal churches proclaim that “all – without exception – are welcome to receive” when they celebrate the Eucharist. Because of this tension and widespread breaking of canon law, in 2012 General Convention considered revising the canons to remove the language prohibiting unbaptized people from receiving. Other denominations, like the United Methodists, have officially adopted an “open communion” policy. But the resolution did not pass at General Convention, and so the traditional teaching stands, which, despite the terse and prohibitive sound of the way the canon is worded, essentially says that one must make a commitment to Jesus before receiving the Eucharist.

Now, before we consider what the Eucharistic theology in chapter 6 of John’s Gospel might have to contribute to this debate, I’d like to walk you through the theology that advocates for this traditional sequence, for the “communion of the baptized” rather than “communion of all.”

The theological basis behind offering communion only to baptized Christians is that receiving communion is a way of renewing one’s baptismal vow to follow Jesus, so it doesn’t make sense for someone who has not made a commitment to Jesus to receive. Doing so would be like having a “renewal of vows” ceremony with someone to whom you were not yet married. The Catechism says we “*strengthen* our union with Christ” in communion, which presumes that we are already in a union with him. Just as you must marry your spouse before you can renew your vows to them, you must commit to Jesus in baptism before you can renew your commitment to him in communion.

In the process of revising the prayer book in the late 1970s, the Episcopal Church took some clear positions about the rituals of Christian initiation, one of which is that baptism and Eucharist are intimately connected, and that receiving communion represents a completion of one’s initiation into the Body of Christ. David Babin, formerly a professor at the Episcopal seminary in Chicago, wrote during the discussion over prayer book revision:

Eating and drinking at the Lord’s Table is the resolution or fulfillment of the initiatory action... Baptism is not something inserted into the

eucharist – it is integral to it ...It is the baptized who make eucharist, and one of the things we are about each time we participate in the eucharist is the re-calling of our own re-birth into the Body of Christ.¹

But the “new prayer book” didn’t create this idea out of thin air. The framers of the 1979 prayer book were attempting, by the revisions they proposed, to bring the liturgy in closer conformity with ancient church practice.

In the early church, most people baptized were adults, and there was one ceremony that included both Baptism and Communion. Before you were baptized, you would be allowed to attend the first part of worship, the Liturgy of the Word, and hear the readings and the prayers and the sermon, but anyone who was not baptized would have to leave the service after the Peace. The Lord’s Supper was only celebrated among those who were baptized Christians. When you were finished with the preparation process and were finally baptized, in that same ceremony you took your first communion.

That baptism and communion were both part of one experience by which one was initiated into the Christian faith had been lost to much of the Western church by the 20th century, largely due to the practice of delaying First Communion until after Confirmation for children who were baptized as infants. (Confirmation, of course, was understood to be the completion of one’s Christian initiation, but in practice it separated by many years what had been accomplished in one liturgy for most of the church’s history.)

In terms of scriptural warrant for restricting communion to baptized Christians, those who hold this perspective will point to the fact that the Last Supper was a meal that Jesus shared just with his disciples – those who had chosen to follow him – not everyone, indiscriminately. And, if the Eucharist was a Passover meal, then it is in keeping with the tradition and heritage of that meal that it be open only to believing members of that faith community. The instructions on how to eat the Passover in Exodus say,

“No foreigner shall eat of it,⁴⁴ but any slave who has been purchased may eat of it after he has been circumcised...⁴⁸ If an alien who resides with you wants to celebrate the passover to the LORD, all his

¹ David E. Babin, *Praise the Lord: A Guide to the Proposed Draft Book of Common Prayer 1976*. (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1976), 42-43.

males shall be circumcised; then he may draw near to celebrate it; he shall be regarded as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it.” (Exodus 12:43-48)

Since circumcision was the marker of identity as a Jew and an initiation ritual for those who converted to Judaism, it follows that the Eucharist, the Christian descendant of the Passover meal, should be restricted to those who have undergone the Christian initiation ritual of baptism.

There are also passages like 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, where Paul admonishes the church at Corinth for behaving inappropriately at the Lord’s Supper. He says to them,

“Whoever... eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.”

Some advocates of the traditional sequence of baptism before communion take this passage to mean that if someone receives communion “without discerning the body” – that is, without having been thoroughly instructed as to what the Eucharist is and approaching it with sufficient reverence and respect, then they can “eat and drink judgment against themselves.” They have a genuine concern that distributing communion to a non-believer could actually cause them spiritual harm.

If receiving communion is a renewal of baptismal vows, and the main vow that one makes at their baptism is to commit to follow Christ, then it is hard to see how someone who has not made a commitment to follow Christ could appropriately receive communion. But next week, we’ll look at the other side of the debate, and how the Gospel of John, despite all of its emphasis on believing in Jesus for salvation, might offer a perspective on the Eucharist that challenges the traditional understanding.

Relevant Scripture Passages:

Exodus 12

43 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: This is the ordinance for the passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, ⁴⁴but any slave who has been purchased may eat of it after he has been circumcised; ⁴⁵no bound or hired servant may eat of it. ⁴⁶It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the animal outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. ⁴⁷The whole congregation of Israel shall celebrate it. ⁴⁸If an alien who resides with you wants to celebrate the passover to the LORD, all his males shall be circumcised; then he may draw near to celebrate it; he shall be regarded as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it; ⁴⁹there shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you.

Mark 14

22 While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ ²³Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵Truly I tell you, **I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.**’

Matthew 26

17 On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?’ ¹⁸He said, ‘Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, “The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.” ’ ¹⁹So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

20 When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; ²¹and while they were eating, he said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.’ ²²And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, ‘Surely not I, Lord?’ ²³He answered, ‘The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.’ ²⁵Judas, who betrayed him, said, ‘Surely not I, Rabbi?’ He replied, ‘You have said so.’

26 While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ ²⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell

you, **I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.**'

Luke 22

7 Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. ⁸So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it.' ⁹They asked him, 'Where do you want us to make preparations for it?' ¹⁰'Listen,' he said to them, 'when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters ¹¹and say to the owner of the house, "The teacher asks you, 'Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?''" ¹²He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there.' ¹³So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

14 When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, **I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.**' ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that **from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.**' ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. **Do this in remembrance of me.**' ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'

John 6

⁴Now the **Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.** ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹'**There is a boy here [parallel to the boy in the Passover meal?] who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?'** ¹⁰Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹**Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks [bless], he distributed [give/gave] them to those who were seated; [Eucharistic pattern – only thing missing is the "broke the bread"... this appears in the synoptics, though]** so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the **fragments** left over [**implies the bread was broken**], so that nothing may be lost.' ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

The Bread from Heaven

25 When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’²⁶ Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.’²⁷ **Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.** For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.’²⁸ Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’²⁹ Jesus answered them, ‘**This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.**’³⁰ So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?’³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”³² Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.’³³ **For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.**’³⁴ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

35 Jesus said to them, ‘**I am the bread of life.** Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.’³⁷ Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and **anyone who comes to me I will never drive away;**³⁸ for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.’³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.’⁴⁰ This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.’

41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’⁴² They were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, “I have come down from heaven?”?’⁴³ Jesus answered them, ‘Do not complain among yourselves.’⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.’⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God.” Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.’⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.’⁴⁷ Very truly, I tell you, **whoever believes has eternal life.**⁴⁸ **I am the bread of life.**⁴⁹ **Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.**⁵⁰ **This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.**⁵¹ **I am the living bread that came down from heaven. 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.**’

52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’⁵³ So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, **unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.**’⁵⁴ **Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last**

day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.’ ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

“It has recognized also that readers who knew of baptism and the Supper could not help associating Jesus' words with these rituals and understanding that by themselves they have no magic power, but that when taken by faith, they become signs and power of the life that Christ shares with the believer.” (p.24)

Daniel Ausburger, “John and the Institution of the Lord’s Supper.” *ANDREWS UNIVERSITY SEMINARY STUDIES: The Journal of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary of Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan*. Vol. 1, 1963.