

This Holy Mystery (John 6:56-69)

The box was black lacquer with bright red and gold Asian designs. It was, I thought, just about the size – if not the shape – of a small casket. Unlike a casket, however, the black box had several slits in the top and sides. A man wearing a tuxedo opened up the top of the box and helped the pretty woman inside. Once she was in the box the top was closed and locked. I could see the woman's head sticking out of one end of the box and her feet sticking out the other end.

The tuxedo guy then proceeded to insert steel panels in the slits on the top and sides of the box. It seemed to me that these steel panels should have cut the poor woman into pieces. I watched with great interest and awe as he then inserted a large saw in one of the slits and began to saw the box in half.

When the sawing was complete, the tuxedo guy pulled apart the two halves of the box, separating them by at least two feet. At the end of one half of the box, I could still see the pretty woman's smiling face. At the same time the woman was wiggling her feet out of the end of the other half of the box.

Tuxedo guy then brought the two halves back together and began removing the steel panels. When all the panels were removed he unlocked the box and opened the top. The pretty woman emerged unscathed and in one piece from the box to the delighted applause of the audience.

I was a young boy the first time I witnessed the old "sawing the woman in

half" magic trick. Years later I had an opportunity to see how that trick is actually performed. You will probably not be surprised to discover that there are actually two women and no one is cut in half or put back together. Magic never had the same meaning for me after discovering the reality of that trick. That day I learned the value of mystery, that some things are better left unexplained. Please pray with me.

Awesome God, you have given us above all your creation the ability to reason and understand much of the universe that surrounds us. Yet for all our intellect you have left some things unexplained – a mystery. Help us to embrace the mystery of our faith – to allow the power of your spirit to take us to new heights in your kingdom. Through your son Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Ah, the mysteries of life! The day I learned the secret to that magic trick my world became a little more ordered – for better or worse. But in the long run it really did extend my appreciation for mystery in God's created order.

Can you imagine how boring life would be if we understood everything under heaven? What would we have to look forward to if we were able comprehend and foresee beyond this world into the greater universe and even the kingdom of heaven? For good

reason, heaven and earth are filled with mystery.

The traditional liturgy of our church makes a direct reference to the significance of that mystery. We call it *the mystery of our faith* – that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. The resurrection of Jesus Christ remains a mystery to us. What happened in the tomb between Friday and Sunday will, hopefully, never be fully explained or understood. It is our faith that the mystery occurred and that marks us as “Christian.” Theologically, it is that mystery that separates us from Judaism and Islam, although those faith traditions have their own mysteries.

The resurrection and how we will participate in it after death comes to our earthly bodies is but one of the mysteries our faith. Our communion with God through the elements of bread and wine, known as the Eucharist, is also a mystery. In our United Methodist tradition we refer to this act of communing with God and with each other as a Holy Mystery.

Most practicing Christians understand Holy Communion to be the way we remember Jesus and the sacrifices that were made for us on the cross. The synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – all contain the familiar story of the Passover in the Upper Room on the night Jesus was arrested.

On that night Jesus gathered his closest followers around a table to eat a meal. He explained to them that he had lived his entire life to celebrate this one meal. Can you imagine living your entire life for just one meal? And a simple meal at that! He went on to explain that this would be his last meal for a long, long time to come. He would not eat the bread or share the cup again until the end of time as we know it. It

was the last supper on this earth for Jesus of Nazareth. But was the first of many such meals for us – the followers of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of John doesn't contain the familiar story of the Last Supper as told in the synoptic gospels. The Gospel of John is more of a theological work than it is an account of Jesus' ministry. Most theological works are more abstract and less concrete. This means we need to do some thinking and interpreting in order to understand and appreciate what is written in John.

In the gospel reading this morning Jesus says, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in he.” He goes on to say, “... the one who feeds on me will live because of me.” This passage in John is disturbing to most people. It was disturbing to many of Jesus' followers. Reading goes on to say that “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” As a consequence of this “hard teaching” many of the disciples turned away from Jesus and left his company. The twelve, however, remained even though they struggled to understand what Jesus was saying.

How did you react to those words this morning? What image comes to mind when you think of Jesus saying, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in he ... the one who feeds on me will live because of me.” These words are not just “a hard teaching.” The idea that seems to be conveyed by John's theology congers up an image of cannibalism. In fact, those gentiles we hear so much about in the New Testament – those folks formerly known as pagans – thought that was exactly what Jesus was talking about. The pagans rituals

may have been strange to Jews in the first century Mediterranean culture, but those rituals didn't extend to cannibalism. John's theology was apparently misunderstood.

Today, we know that Jesus was speaking metaphorically. Later in our gospel reading Jesus refers to manna – bread from heaven – that sustained the Israelites for a time while they wandered in the desert. But eventually they died. When Jesus speaks of feasting on his flesh and blood he is speaking of his spirit – the Holy Spirit. In the passage just before today's reading Jesus refers to himself as "the bread of life." If you eat this bread – the bread of life – you will live forever.

One of my favorite theologians, Frederick Buechner, once said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but he doesn't live long without it."¹ What Buechner is saying is that there is more to life than simple bread, but without that simple bread we can't expect to live very long. Buechner is speaking about more than flour, water and yeast. Actually, we could go our entire lives and never eat a slice of bread and still live a nutritious life. Like Jesus, Buechner is talking about *the bread of life*. Jesus is that bread that we just can't live without. It is for this reason that bread is the symbol for one of the most beautiful mysteries of our faith. What mysterious power does this bread have that it should sustain each of us for eternity?

Holy Communion is steeped in mystery. As United Methodists we believe that Christ is present in the bread. It is through the bread – the breaking of the bread – that Jesus is revealed to the Christian world. There is

mystery in the breaking of that bread. When the loaf is broken Jesus is revealed to the Christian world. This is what we believe. How he is present in the bread is, however, a mystery. Is the loaf transformed into flesh? Does the wine actually become the blood of Christ? This is not what we believe! The bread and wine symbolize Christ's presence in the world as the Risen Christ.

It was Easter Sunday after the resurrection when Jesus joined two disciples as they made their way home to the village of Emmaus. The two didn't know it was Jesus that walked the four and one-half miles with them. But at the end of the day, when they gathered around the table for a simple meal that all changed. Jesus took the bread from the table. He blessed the bread and broke it. And in the breaking of the bread his presence was made known to the disciples. There is mystery in the breaking of the bread.

Holy Communion is the primary means by which we experience God's grace in the world. Yet many Christians see it as just another ritual. When you come to the table what is in your heart? What are you thinking about?

Most Christians know Holy Communion to be a memorial ritual. On that last night in the Upper Room Jesus commanded his followers then – and us today – to "do this in remembrance of me." But the meal is so much more. What are we asked to remember? If all we think about – or remember – is the sadness of his death we are missing out on the mystery.

Think about the memorial aspects of Holy Communion this way. After a funeral service we usually gather at someone's house or other place to do what? We gather to share a meal – that is to say – we gather to break bread. In

¹ Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA, copyright © 1973, 1993 by Frederick Buechner), page 13.

this time of togetherness we don't usually sit around talking about how the poor soul we just buried died. We invest our time in talking about – that is to say remembering – how he or she lived. We don't celebrate death, we celebrate life. This is what Jesus meant when he said "do this and remember me." He wants us to remember how he lived – the example he gave to us for living a life worthy of the gospel message.

The mystery we experience when we participate in Holy Communion extends well beyond remembering. In this holy mystery we experience thanksgiving, fellowship, sacrifice, the action of the Holy Spirit, and a foretaste of the future.

When we gather around the table we thank God for the mighty acts of salvation we experience in the Jesus of history and the risen Christ of faith. We also thank God for all the many ways our lives have been touched and blessed. In fact, the liturgy of the church which has been handed down from the early second century Christian church is called the Great Thanksgiving.

Around this table we come in fellowship to be in communion with God and each other. Think of Holy Communion as being a family reunion. Have you ever gone to a family reunion that didn't involve a meal? Probably not. Food – bread – is important to fellowship.

When you come to the table anticipate this glimpse of the way God intends for us to live. Savor the foretaste of the good things that God has in store for you. Don't try to understand it. Feel it in your heart. Come and experience the mystery as you share the bread of life. Come and experience this holy mystery of God's enduring love for you.