

Grace to you and peace from God our creator, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As most of you know, Helen and I, and our daughter Marian, have just returned from a three-week trip to England and Scotland. One of the things I like to do when I'm in England is to visit churches, especially old churches. It's an occupational hazard, I guess, of being both a pastor and a trained historian. Many years ago I set myself the goal of visiting all of the thirty-some Anglican cathedrals, and I've gotten about half way there. I did not advance the count on this trip, though we did visit St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh, but that belongs to the Church of Scotland. No I have to say, I have a complicated relationship with cathedrals. I am awed by their beauty and astounded at what could be built just with stone and lead and glass and only medieval technology – ropes and pulleys and scaffolding. But I am also well aware that these gigantic churches were not built for purely religious reasons. They were show pieces built by the powerful elites of the middle ages to promote the cities in which they were built. Status symbols, something like what football stadiums do for American cities. And with similarly staggering costs. Like many Americans, the very first English church I visited, almost exactly 34 years ago, was Westminster Abbey, which is technically not a cathedral, but is larger and more ornate than almost all of the actual English cathedrals. Unlike most people, my first reaction was not positive. What put me off was all of the monuments. Some of you have been there and know what I'm talking about. It was as if all of these rich and famous dead people were elbowing each other for pride of place in the church. It did not feel like a place of worship to me, but a giant mausoleum, with all these gaudy neo-classical and Victorian tombs obscuring the medieval gothic architecture. Fortunately, I stuck around for choral vespers and was able to get a somewhat different second impression.

On this recent trip I decided to do something different. Instead of more cathedrals, I decided I wanted to visit some of the historic parish churches in and around Helen's home town. Most of them were very old – 800, 900 years, build on even older foundations. In several of the larger churches you could see evidence of medieval side chapels where priests were employed to say private masses on behalf of the dead – for the purpose of getting them out of purgatory sooner. This was one of the distortions of the faith that Luther objected to, and that led to the Reformation 500 years ago. In one church in York, tucked back behind the medieval timber buildings that York is famous for, is a parish church that has a side chapel, which, as it was explained by a guide, was used only for the family that gave the money for the church. On Sunday mornings the family would gather in their chapel with their own priest, and the rest of the congregation would be in the main part of the building with another priest, and they would hold the service simultaneously. And in order to keep things in sync, there was a little hole cut in the wall so that the priest in the private chapel could see the priest in the main part and keep things lined up.

All of my many visits to historic churches over the years and on this trip has led me to realize how people have often tended to use the Christian faith for their own personal agendas, for what they can get out of it for themselves. And it's made me realize that this is not only a problem of the past, and we shouldn't imagine that the Reformation solved that problem just by getting rid of indulgences and private masses. It's a perpetual problem that sinful human beings have – that you and I have.

Believe it or not there is a connection between what I have been talking about here and our readings, especially our Gospel reading from John. This is our fourth of five weeks in this sixth chapter of John. But today I can sum up Jesus' point because next week's reading focuses on the reaction of Jesus' disciples to his difficult words. This chapter started with the feeding of the five

thousand, after which Jesus goes off with his disciples across the sea. But the crowds follow, and when they find him, Jesus says this: “you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” In other words, they want some more food. They weren’t concerned with the bigger picture, with God’s agenda of giving life to the world, genuine, abundant life characterized not by selfish concerns but by love for one another.

Jesus goes on in this chapter to talk about himself as the bread of life, which I’m sure you heard all about over the past two weeks. And he does this by contrasting himself with the manna in the wilderness in the Exodus story. This chapter is full of Exodus imagery, because the Exodus – God saving God’s people from captivity in Egypt and delivering them to the promised land – was the central and defining event for the people of Israel. That’s what God’s salvation meant to them. Real, earthly salvation from the real, earthly threat of slavery and oppression in a foreign land. And they were right about that. But it was only part of what God intended for them. Jesus’ point is that the salvation that God is working through him goes beyond liberation from slavery and the gift of their own land. It’s about reestablishing their broken relationships, with God and with one another. The manna that God gave the Israelites in the wilderness kept them alive for a while, but in that respect it was just like any other bread. And it wasn’t enough to keep them from going after other gods. It didn’t make them love God or one another. Jesus says then that he is the true bread from heaven, and whoever eats him has true life, life that is genuine, abundant, and unending.

Today is where the text starts to get really provocative and a little weird. Jesus is not content to let this be mere symbolism. He says, no you actually have to eat me. You have to chew on my flesh and drink my blood. That’s the sense of the Greek word for “eat” here – to gnaw or chew. This is really “in your face” stuff that Jesus is doing here. (If it were anybody else I’d say he’s being kind of a jerk here.) And as we will see next week, this is the last straw for many of his followers. Now it’s really important to be aware of what John’s Gospel is doing here, and to remind ourselves that this is not journalism or history, but theology, and that it has more to do with the church at the end of the first century that John is writing to than it does with the historical Jesus. John is pushing the idea already expressed by Paul half a century earlier that the church is the body of Christ, the continuation of Christ’s presence in the world after his resurrection and ascension, that God is really and truly present in and among them. And a key way that happens for them on an ongoing basis is in their weekly celebration of Holy Communion. This emphasis was picked up by Luther in his debate with other reformers and it was so important to him that it led the Lutheran and other Protestants to split over the issue. (Aside on Reformed altars in Scotland.) It was so important because emphasizes that God is the one who is active in Holy Communion. This is not something that we do for God each Sunday. It is not just a memorial. This is God truly present with us and for us, forming us into his body, binding us together in love – love for God and for one another. It’s an unconditional promise: The body of Christ, for you. The blood of Christ, for you. Right here, right now, and not just for your own sake (though surely for your own sake), but for the sake of the world. I can express it in no better way than in the final stanza of the hymn we are about to sing. Listen for this. “Send us now with grace and courage to the hungry, lost, bereaved. In our living and our dying we become what we receive: Christ’s own body, blessed and broken, cup o’erflowing, life outpoured, given as a living token of your world redeemed, restored.” May we take that promise to heart, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.