

## Truly God, truly human, truly here

John 6:51-58

A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

What is real? And what is really real? That's what we're about. What is really, really, really, really, really real? What is really real is that Jesus Christ truly is who we say he is. That is not just a nice idea, or a handy idea. What is it that we say?

We confess that the eternal God, Lord, Lord of lords, Creator, Father of all, became this human being, born about 4 B.C., who had a true mother, and who walked on earth and died. Truly human. Not walking two inches off the earth. Truly human. Of course, truly God as well. And as it says at the Council of Chalcedon (451), "unmixed and undivided," and stop there! Don't try to sort that out. That is the basis of what we confess, and when we confess that, we say: That's the reality, that is the reality behind everything and determines what everything is about.

Having said that, we come to this disputed text, John 6:53: "Truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." That's repeated three more times in similar words. It's one of those very disputed passages.

An example of how it's disputed is that at the time of the Reformation there was a group called Sacramentarians, who said when we receive the bread, we tear his flesh with our teeth, like cannibals. This view, called the Capernaite heresy, is condemned in our *Book of Concord* (Tappert 483:15; Kolb/Wengert 506:15).

This is not what the Gospel of John means. This text today repeats the end of the text from last week, John 6:51, which said: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." That puts it in a more likely understood context.

What is this about? What do we mean when we say, Jesus Christ is really human and really God determines what we say about the Lord's Supper. What do we mean when we say "real presence"?

There are three ways in which this has been approached. The first has to do with the official Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue. Back in 1968, a group of top experts, ten Roman Catholics and ten Lutherans appointed by their respective church bodies, agreed on a ten-page statement about the Lord's Supper. That agreement was truly amazing. It even dealt with that technical word, "transubstantiation," which in Catholic thinking says: This wine and bread truly become Jesus' body and blood, they just appear to be bread and wine.

The whole Dialogue was able to say together: "We are persuaded that no single vocabulary or conceptual framework can be adequate, exclusive or final in the theological enterprise."<sup>1</sup> In other words they said this terminology cannot be insisted upon, but it can be used. It is important to realize that the Dialogue was thinking together theologizing. They were not drafting legislation for their churches.

From 1965 on, this Dialogue met twice a year for four days, including always a Sunday, yet the Lutheran scholars and the Catholic scholars never celebrated communion together. They knew not to do that. Considering their wide agreement on the Lord's Supper, why not? Why didn't they have communion together?

As you may know, Roman Catholics are expressly forbidden to take communion elsewhere. Exceptions are only to be in writing by the bishop. A priest can't make exceptions. Why? Because if Catholics could go to communion elsewhere, they would imply that non-Roman Catholic communion is something. From the point of view of Roman Catholic theology, when we Lutherans celebrate communion, nothing sacramental happens.

Similarly non-Roman Catholics are instructed that they are not to take part in Roman Catholic Eucharists/communion services. Exceptions again, only in writing, and only by the bishop. Exceptions cannot be granted by a priest.

What is the reason for these prohibitions? There are two reasons. Again, this kind of partaking in each other's communion services would be implying that there is some kind of equality between Catholics and others, and Rome does not accept that.

What is really at stake is that when you go to a Roman Catholic communion service and take part without being Roman Catholic, you are accepting the authority of the Pope. That's because the Pope is the one with special grace who ordains the bishops. And the bishops are the ones who ordain the priests, and only the priests in the Catholic Church have through their ordination the special grace to make it happen, that is, to make Christ truly present in the communion service. That's the other side of it.

Although we can say there is wide agreement between Lutherans and Catholics on communion, what is then meant by "real" is, when it comes down to it, on the one hand, for Roman Catholics, it is **the authority of the Pope**, and on the other hand, for Lutherans, it is **the power of the Word**, the proclaiming of Christ.

The second way this is understood has to do with what communion is. In recent years some Lutherans have said that communion is "hospitality." It's about being open and welcoming, and everybody is welcome at the Table. Some have even said expressly that

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<sup>1</sup> *The Eucharist as Sacrifice. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue III*. Eds. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1967) 196-97.

you can have communion without being baptized. It's all just a matter of being inclusive, being open and welcoming.

But this turns the whole matter of communion into an "experience," and it's how you feel about it, how you think about it, and how you understand it. It depends on your thinking. This is the other extreme.

This brings us to the third approach, the Reformation recovery of Paul and the New Testament. What is at stake here is: Did he truly become one of us at the same time remaining God entirely? This is basic to what we say in the Nicene Creed. He is "of one substance with the Father."

How is this understood in the Gospel of John? He is at the right hand of the Father, but he continues to be the one who became human. He continues to be truly human and truly God. He didn't give that up. And he continues among us simultaneously, because the Holy Spirit makes it happen. The Gospel of John is the most specific about this in the New Testament. It's very easy to remember: John 14:26, 15:26, and 16:13-15 say it expressly. The Holy Spirit has one job, which is to re-present Jesus and to make him present.

Recall two examples. First, the end of the Gospel of John, chapter 21, when the disciples say: "Let's go fishing." They have this huge catch of fish and then see someone on the shore, who has already built a big fire. They recognize him when he says: "Let's eat together." That is parallel to what you have in Luke 24:13-35. Remember the two on the way to Emmaus. A stranger walks with them and talks to them. They scratch their heads; they can't quite figure out all this, and then when he breaks the bread, they said: "We knew it was the Lord."

It's in his Word and his coming to us in Baptism and the Lord's Supper, just as he truly comes to be among us, as truly one of us. He continues. He truly comes, and he truly does what he does.

They were people who didn't understand. They were not making any big decision or had any sense of what this is about, but to them and to us the Lord truly comes and truly does what he does.

This can be seen in a parallel passage in 1 Cor 10:16-17, where Paul writes about food sacrificed to idols, he says: "Don't do that. Don't eat that." And then adds: What is it that we do? And answers:

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one loaf."

And that means that we are in Christ, and that includes receiving life from him now and forever. He comes to us although he is outside of us, and it's in spite of us. He is truly among us and in us, and he, through his Word, makes us his own, now and forever, and that changes everything. Amen