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St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

Year C, The Body and Blood of Christ: Corpus Christi, Solemn Mass
Genesis 14:18–20; Psalm 145:1–9; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Luke 22:14–30

I still vividly remember the first time that I received the Body and Blood of Christ. Though, I'm not sure I knew that's what it was. I'm certain I didn't really know what it meant, even if I knew what it was called. I was pretty young. Let's say around four years old. I was at church with my grandmother, and she turned to me and said, "today you're going to receive communion". "Um, OK", I said.

It was in the 70s. I'm not sure if the '79 Prayer Book was out or still in its trial phase, but at this point confirmation was no longer required for communion. Baptism was enough, and that news had made its way to my grandmother.

My preparation for communion was limited to the following instruction: "just do what I do when we get up there." And so off we went to kneel at the altar rail. I paid attention and followed her lead. I ate and I drank. And, then, after that, I decided that I wanted to be a priest. No, I'm just kidding. That part's not true. But, I did eat and I did drink.

I remember looking around. Seeing everyone else kneeling at the rail. I felt a connection to them. Of course, without any sort of theological explanation along the lines of us all receiving the Body of Christ and somehow being the Body of Christ. Individual members making up the Body. Nothing like that.

But, I did sense something. I think that's why I remember it so vividly. I suppose if we were able to go back in time and ask, I may have said something along the lines of now being part of the team. No longer sitting back there on the bench, waiting while everyone else got to go up front where the action was.

All joking aside, I do remember the sacrament being serious business. Though, to be clear, this wasn't the type of parish that would have been celebrating Corpus Christi as we are here today at Saint Mary's. It's unfortunate, actually, that the feast isn't observed more widely in the Episcopal Church.

The celebration of Corpus Christi dates all the way back to the 13th century to a Belgian woman named Juliana, a religious and a mystic, who had a vision of Christ that inspired this feast. It was initially celebrated locally before spreading beyond Belgium and then ultimately throughout the western church.

In the medieval period, Corpus Christi not only included a procession (today, we'll process indoors around the church), but there also would have been pageants and fairs all throughout the town. I'm imagining something along the lines of the Medieval Festival held each year up by the Cloisters at Fort Tryon Park.

It was an event that, especially in England, brought the local society together and is described by some scholars as having emphasized unity within the community.¹ Some say it functioned as a critique on the status quo and the different layers of medieval society; where there were those who were part of an elite class and those who were not.²

In other words, there were people on the inside and people on the outside of society. But, at Corpus Christi, with the processions, and the pageants, and the fairs, everybody became an insider. Part of the team. For that moment, there wasn't any more of an "us" and a "them".

In today's Gospel lesson from Luke, where Our Lord institutes the sacrament of his Body and Blood at the Last Supper, we hear a similar message. Jesus' words turn the whole idea of a hierarchical society on its head.

Jesus says, "the kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them... But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves." This message is consistent across the gospel accounts, but Luke is unique in that he features it here at this point. He's showing how critical a concept it is by tying it to the Body and Blood of Christ.

Hearing these words today, about kings exercising lordship over others, my mind turns to the Juneteenth celebrations, the "pageants and the fairs," that are going on across the country, bringing people together. Sure, much progress has been made since June 19, 1865, when news of the end of slavery reached Texas, over two years after the Emancipation Proclamation. At the same time, it doesn't take much to see that there is still a ways to go for our society to resemble anything even remotely like what Jesus is talking about here in Luke, where the most powerful ought to be the ones to humble themselves and serve the weak and vulnerable.

And there's something else, also unique to Luke's Last Supper, relative to Matthew and Mark, to reflect on. In Luke, there's a bit of a downplaying of Judas' betrayal at the Last Supper. It's there, we heard it, but Luke moves it to after the words about the bread and the wine. It becomes more of a lead-in to the larger discussion around greatness and serving.

But, in Matthew and Mark, the theme of betrayal is more inescapable.³ It opens up the meal. The takeaway for us, focusing on Luke today, is that Luke seems to have made a deliberate choice here since he almost certainly had Mark as a source text.

By making this change, Luke's version emphasizes more of a sense of the closeness for those at table with Jesus -- with Jesus and with each other. Luke doesn't want to allow betrayal to distract from the meal.

¹ Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen Westerfield Tucker, eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 316.

² Ibid.

³ Matthew 26:20-30; Mark 14:17-26.

It makes some sense to me that Luke, who does this, is also the evangelist to include the Road to Emmaus resurrection account.⁴ There's a closeness there too, where two of Jesus' followers walk along with him, even though they don't realize who this stranger is. They don't treat him like a stranger. They invite him in to stay with them because it's evening. They invite him into their home. They invite a stranger in. They invite Jesus in. And then, after that, he becomes known to them in the breaking of bread.

As we celebrate the Body and Blood of Christ on this feast, it's an opportunity for us to reflect not only on our communion with Jesus, but also how through this sacrament, we are brought into relationship with each other. The procession of the sacrament around the church will encircle all of us within its path. I expect that there will be a sense of inclusion and closeness that brings us all together.

But, the question then becomes: how do we then open up this circle widely to further realize Jesus' vision?

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Luke 24:13-35.