

A sermon delivered by
the Rev. David W. Fleenor, M.Div., STM
Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Sunday, August 13, 2006
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Year B, Proper 14

<http://www.io.com/~kellywp/YearB/Pentecost/BProp14.html>

Deuteronomy 8:1-10

Ephesians 4:(25-29)30-5:2

John 6:37-51

Psalm 34 or 34:1-8

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Metabolism

Recently, while on vacation, I visited my parents. My mother told me that she thinks my metabolism is slowing down. I think that was her way of subtly saying that I am not as thin as I used to be. ☺ When I was a teenager I could eat anything I wanted without concern. Now that I am in my 30s that is no longer true. Perhaps you know what I am talking about.

Well, when I returned home from vacation I continued to think about what she said. The word metabolism remained in my mind so I went online and looked it up. What I learned is that metabolism is defined as a combination of processes whereby the body does two things:

- 1) Synthesizes part of the food you eat for growth, and
- 2) Breaks down substances to produce energy.

Both of those processes are important and relevant to today's Gospel lesson. The idea of metabolism has special resonance for me as I hear the Scriptures today, especially when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." This is important to us because we are Eucharistically-centered Christians. Every Sunday we come to this place to eat bread. What happens to that bread once we have consumed it? What metabolic process takes place within us when we consume the flesh of our Lord?

When we eat this bread we metabolize Christ into ourselves and, at the same time, we are metabolized into the life of God.

II. UNION WITH THE DIVINE

As I mentioned a moment ago, metabolism involves absorbing food into one's body – the food becomes a part of the body. The Holy Eucharist has a similar implication. Through our relationship with God and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist we synthesize Christ into us and we are synthesized into him. This is sometimes called mystical union and it is one way of understanding our salvation.

A. Theosis

Theosis is the term the Eastern Orthodox give it. It is also known as divinization, deification, or divine union. All of the Christian life is a movement into the life of the divine. Someone defined it as "...the continual deepening of communion between God and [hum]an[kind], a unification without fusion of the human person with the divine persons." (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Orthodox_Church).

That phrase "a unification without fusion" is important. Union with God does not mean that we become a god. When we speak of being divinized we are not being idolatrous or proclaiming a New Age doctrine. Humanity and divinity are not a set of clothes that are exchanged. We are not saying that one's humanity is lost like the snake shedding its skin in order to acquire a new, divine skin. In fact, the beautiful paradox of theosis, or union with God, is that as we are being united to the life of God the fullness of our humanity is actualized. In other words, union with the Divine brings about the fullness of our humanity.

What does that look like? Christ, the incarnate one, is the foremost example. He was both fully human and fully divine. He struggled as we do, but was without sin. He was able to find the grace and strength to transcend his self and give away his life to others.

1. Fullness of humanity

One theologian put it this way: **To be truly godly is to be fully human** (unknown author). Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams equates living into the fullness of our humanity with holiness (See Rowan Williams, "Evensong address given to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Archbishop Michael Ramsey at Magdalene College, Cambridge." 31 October 2004. Accessed at http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/2004/041031.html). The incarnation is an implicit blessing of our humanity and an explicit call to live fully into it. This means that God wants us to live, to love, to laugh, and to experience the full range of our humanity.

2. Dehumanization

It also means that God wants us to react to de-humanizing forces in this world that seek to oppress and suffocate the gift of humanity. Let me give you two large-scale examples.

a. Genocide in Rwanda

Over 10 years ago in Rwanda 800,000 Tutsi were slaughtered in a mere 100 days with crude instruments such as axes by their Hutu countrymen. This atrocity occurred faster than the Nazi extermination during WWII. This genocide has been called "A Triumph of

Evil” (See the PBS broadcast “A Triumph of Evil” at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/evil/>).

b. Genocide in Darfur

Today, in Darfur, Sudan in what has been called the worst humanitarian crisis in the world “a government backed group known as the ‘Janjaweed’ terrorize Africans, destroying villages, killing and maiming men, ransacking food supplies and blocking international assistance.” The Washington Post’s Ed O’Keefe and Jeffrey Marcus reported that the “Janjaweed also carry out systematic campaigns of rape against African women in an attempt to humiliate them and their families, and to weaken tribal ethnic lines. Human rights groups say the government, by funding the Janjaweed militants, is carrying out an ethnic cleansing campaign” (See Ed O’Keefe and Jeffrey Marcus, “Crisis in Sudan.” Washingtonpost.com 9 September 2004. Accessed at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A20765-2004Jul1.html>).

This type of dehumanization demands a response from us, the Church. If we are called to live fully into our humanity, then we are certainly called to react against dehumanization. There are a dozen other examples of dehumanization, both large and small, that we could all mention. My intention here is to simply illustrate a point: Union with God transforms us into agents of social action. Our participation in the Eucharist – with the bread of life – calls us to life-giving works.

How does it do that?

III. ENERGY FOR MISSION

Recalling that the second aspect of metabolism is converting food into energy, when we eat the bread of life we are not only united to Christ, but we are also energized for mission. The energy created in us through the consumption of the “body of Christ, the bread of heaven” is meant for works of compassion, courage and justice, among others.

One of the finest examples of someone energized by the Eucharist for mission was the very founder of this parish, Dr. George Houghton, a man of compassion, courage and justice himself.

A. Compassion

1. “The little church around the corner”

Dr. George Houghton’s compassion is known around the world. It’s where we get our moniker, “the little church around the corner.” You all probably know the story, but it bears repeating.

In 1870 Dr. Houghton received a knock on his door from two strangers: Edward Holland and Joseph Jefferson, a famous actor known for his portrayal of Rip Van Winkle. Mr. Holland’s father, George – a famous comedian – had passed away and he and Jefferson

were hoping to make funeral arrangements. They had just come from the Episcopal Church of the Atonement on Madison and Twenty-Eighth Street (which no longer exists) where they had been rebuffed by the rector, the Rev. William T. Sabine. At the time, actors were esteemed only a little higher than prostitutes. When Dr. Sabine learned that the deceased had been a player, as they were called, he refused to have the funeral at the church. Jefferson, hurt and indignant, rose to leave. When he reached the door, he turned back to Dr. Sabine and asked, "Well, sir in this dilemma is there no other church to which you can direct me, from which my friend can be buried?" Dr. Sabine replied, "I believe there is a little church around the corner where they do that sort of thing." Jefferson's now famous response was, "If that be so, sir, then God bless the little church around the corner!"

Now standing in Dr. Houghton's office, Jefferson asked if a funeral would be permitted for the deceased. Dr. Houghton, without hesitation, agreed to it. Not wanting a repeat of what had just occurred Jefferson was quick to make Dr. Houghton aware that the deceased had been an actor. After a brief pause, Dr. Houghton, a bit surprised and totally oblivious to the fame of the deceased and Joseph Jefferson, reiterated that a funeral could take place at the Church of the Transfiguration. He said, "I only know that your friend is dead and my services are asked." The arrangements were made and the funeral occurred the following day.

After the funeral Dr. Houghton became famous for this incident as the papers picked up the story. The acting community rallied around "the little church around the corner" and made it their shrine. And, the rest, as they say, is history. [See J. H. Randolph Ray, *My Little Church Around the Corner* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 110-115.]

Dr. Houghton's compassion for the poor and the outcast are legendary. He is an example of holy living that we may emulate and be proud of. But there is more. Dr. Houghton was also a man of courage and justice.

B. Courage & Justice

1. Underground Railway

He was a well known Abolitionist during the Civil war. He allowed the basement of the rectory to be used as a stop on the Underground Railway. Slaves traveling from the South to Canada knew they could find a safe haven here at the Church of the Transfiguration where Dr. Houghton presided. [Ray, 107]

2. Draft Riots

When Congress passed the Conscription Act in 1863, the public attitude towards slaves in New York City took a negative turn. Slaves began to be blamed for the conscription. The Draft Riots broke out and African-Americans had to find a place of refuge from the violence. Where did they turn? This very spot: the Church of the Transfiguration. Dr. Houghton, a man of compassion and justice, harbored them here. As that word spread, a

mob formed to storm the church. Police urged Dr. Houghton to turn his refugees loose into the streets in order to spare the church. Dr. Houghton refused.

In the book, “My Little Church Around the Corner” by Dr. J. Randolph Ray, the story is told this way:

An officer had learned that Transfiguration was marked for attack, and he advised Dr. Houghton to turn the [African-Americans] out into the streets to fend for themselves, or ‘they will tear the church down over your head,’ he said.

“I think not,” said Dr. Houghton.

The police sergeant stared, “What’s to stop them?” he protested.

“I will stand in the door of the church,” Dr. Houghton replied. “I don’t think they will pass me.” He went on to explain that even a wolf was spared in the Middle Ages if he sought refuge at the altar, and in the nineteenth century he hoped that such mercy would be shown to a man.

The sergeant went away, and they settled down to wait. The air was thick with the smoke of burning buildings, and at a dozen spots on the horizon, flames leaped into the sky. At last the roar of the shouting and howling grew closer, and the mob surged around the corner into East Twenty-ninth Street, armed with brickbats, paving stones...and knives. Dr. Houghton was waiting for them beside his iron fence, armed only with [one thing:] a cross.

“Turn [them] loose or we’ll come in and get them!” they shouted.

He held the cross high. The people he was harboring, he told them, were human beings like themselves; they had done no one any harm. Let them remember the teachings of Christ, and go away in peace.

[The crowd yelled some more]. Then for the first time in his life, and probably the last time, Dr. Houghton lost his temper and gave way to fury. “You white devils, you!” he cried, brandishing the cross at them. “Do you know nothing of the spirit of Christ?”

His outburst must have stunned them...[Soon the crowd began] to melt away until even the ringleaders found themselves without support. They vanished too, and the fugitives were saved [Ray, 108-109].

Dr. Houghton is a fine example for us of a man nourished by the Eucharist – the bread of life. He metabolized Christ into himself and, at the same time, was metabolized into the life of God. This caused him to be united with Christ and energized for compassion,

courage, and justice. He was a man that understood the value of all of humanity and that union with God brings about the fullness of our humanity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Dr. Houghton is an example for us today as we hear Christ say, “I am the bread of life... the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Consider these things as you come to the holy table this morning. When you place the bread in your mouth feel it dissolve and become one with you. And hear the words of the Psalmist, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). Be conscious of the energy for mission that it generates within you. Meditate on compassion, courage, and justice. Then go forth into the world to live fully into your humanity, opposing those that seek to dehumanize others, and be energized for good works.