

In preparation for a recent memorial service for Richard Liesching, I discovered that he had been a very involved in the growth of rugby at Dartmouth College. So much so that an award was created in his name. He arrived at Dartmouth from England in the mid 1950s, and he set to work almost immediately playing and coaching the rugby club. One story that has lived on was his encounter with the Athletic Director at the time regarding support for the club. The AD reportedly barked that, “At Dartmouth, we play to WIN.” Richard’s reply was classic, “We play to have FUN, and in doing so WE WILL WIN.”

As I mentioned in the sermon this past week, the distinction is a small one but an important one. The story offers a frame for us to consider the text from John’s gospel appointed for last week. Particularly, we are invited into making distinctions as Jesus’ words can be rather troubling. Jesus says to the crowd of people, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” It is no wonder that many then said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Indeed, many in John’s gospel stop following Jesus because of his words. And many continue to have trouble with what we know as the Eucharist.

While the words may be a comfort to those of us who have participated in communion for a number of years, the phrasing, “this is my body given for you. . . this is my blood shed for you,” does not sit well with others who are not as familiar with the ritual. Indeed, there are those who have left our worship struggling to return because of what sounds like cannibalism. They are in good company. The early Christian Church was reviled by Romans because, among other things, they were perceived to be promoting cannibalism. While the Roman Catholic Church developed a mystical understanding of transubstantiation and Martin Luther talked about “Real Presence” (Christ really present in, with, under, around, over, beneath, and through the elements of Bread and Wine), we still struggle with the fixation on body and blood in the Eucharist.

Thus, three brief items to offer a different perspective--akin to playing to win versus playing to have fun--on the meal that feeds us.

The first item involves two distinctions from a Roman Catholic liturgist, Ansgar Chapungo. They are *Dynamic Equivalence* and *Creative Assimilation*. Chapungo uses these phrases to help the interplay between culture and worship. Rather than the West or Northern Hemisphere imposing its practice on other cultures, is there a way for respectful dialogue to take place and the form of worship in a particular location takes on some of the local flavor. Indeed, Chapungo would argue that shifting one’s practice due to elements in or aspects of a different culture--finding equivalencies that resonate or assimilating a particular practice in a creative way--can enhance the proclamation of the gospel in that locale. Chapungo’s classic example focuses on the Eucharistic meal.

Basically, he asks, “If wheat in a particular area is scarce, does it make sense to use bread in the Eucharistic meal?” If the whole of the meal is to express community, oneness, that there is enough and enough for everyone, does the presence of a substance in that particular culture that is a sign of wealth and division make sense? Great question. It also is a question that moves us away from a rigid performance of the meal, to the dynamic engagement that certainly Jesus recognized and the Church has stumbled into from time to time. Things change. So do we and our practices. The heart of the ritual, however, need not. Again, community, oneness, and that there is enough and enough for everyone are wonderful themes to continually hold up.

The second distinction is around faith. In the text from last Sunday, after many have left, Peter makes the statement that he and the disciples have nowhere else to go, because Jesus has the words of eternal life, and “we have come to *believe* that you are the Son of God.” So often we hear the word believe, and, I suspect, that we think about thinking. That is, belief is an intellectual assent to *something*. However, belief in this instance--and often with Jesus--has less to do with the activity of the head and more to do with the activity of the heart. Thus, faith in this instance is more rightly translated as *trust*. Which, again, shifts our perspective ever so slightly but, perhaps, even more profoundly to a way of seeing the world and being in the world. Life in Christ is very much about relationship and trust that is the bedrock of all relationships.

Of course, this does not mean all is always well. It does mean that we engage with the promise of Christ’s presence in life by *trusting* where possible and hoping when needed and arguing when we are at our wit’s end. Belief fosters a posture of one true way of doing things. Trust recognizes the messiness of life and holds onto the relationship as a way of making meaning through the good times and the difficult times. I know that we have all been there.

Finally, the distinction of the meal as sacrament rather than sacrifice is helpful. For hundreds of years we have looked at the Eucharistic meal through the lens of sacrifice. One dies for the benefit of others. The problem with this perspective in a nutshell is that it fosters a system where there is always need for one more sacrifice. Inevitably, throughout human history, those who end up getting sacrificed come from the margins of society or those most vulnerable within society. And while Jesus’ “sacrifice” was the one to end all sacrifice, the language we use, while filled with grace and gift, also continues to foster the more problematic side of this activity.

Thus, sacrament is the way that we have always been invited to see the meal and, really, the whole of life. A sacrament is simply a physical element that expresses to us God’s love and grace. Thus, in communion it is bread and wine, and in baptism it is water. I like to say that in marriage the sacrament is literally the physical person who stands next to you. And the Greek Church has a wonderful phrase that there are *70 Sacraments* in the church. By this they mean that there are an innumerable number of sacraments, for, when we think about it, the whole of

creation exists as a sacrament reminding us in a myriad number of ways the love and grace of God. And thus we return to bread and wine as signs of God's promises to us.

While these distinctions do not answer the troubling images that Jesus' words raise in last Sunday's gospel, hopefully, they offer a perspectival shift that helps us to engage more fully and deeply in the gifts that are given in the meal. The bottom line is that they also are ways of seeing God's presence in life as always already with us and for us and never to be removed. It brings us back to the encounter of Richard Liesching with the Dartmouth AD. "We play to have fun, and in so doing we will win," is not just a good way to see the world. It is the truth. For when this is your perspective, you have already won. Thus, it is within our life together. The awareness of the gift of each moment and the grace of the meal that we share are ongoing reminders to us that we are we have already won.

Ansgar Chapungo  
Faith as trust not belief  
Sacrament not sacrifice