

Sermon for Corpus Christi  
Sunday, May 29, 2016  
“Why do we need to celebrate Corpus Christi?”

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-29

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the second week in a row, we celebrate once again a feast that is central to our faith and belief. Last week we celebrated the Holy Trinity, a fundamental doctrine of Christianity. This week, we are celebrating the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, or Corpus Christi in Latin, and while most (not all) but most Christians accept the concept of the Trinity (we don't all understand it, but we accept it) Corpus Christi is a uniquely Catholic celebration that is rooted in our understanding of the Holy Eucharist. It is here that we find fundamental differences among Christians. For many Christian traditions, what happens at the celebration of Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper, is a memorial, a commemoration of what Jesus proclaimed at the Last Supper and what was fulfilled by him on the Cross and by his Resurrection. That is to say, there is a focus on the words, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

I can remember growing up in the Baptist tradition, every first Sunday of the month was a big deal. A large table would be prepared by the wives of the deacons (deaconesses as they were called) with trays of crushed saltine crackers and grape juice that had been placed in small individual glass cups. The trays would be arranged in a sort of cascading manner and covered with a large white linen pall. At the appointed time in the worship service (after the long sermon) twelve deacons dressed in black suits and white gloves would carry that large table down the aisle to the front of the church. They would do so with extreme reverence, swinging their free arms in unison. As a child it always looked to me like they were carrying a coffin. After the table reached the front of the church, the deacons would position themselves around the table in preparation for the prayer over the elements, meanwhile ushers passed out small square linen cloths to any woman in the church who was not wearing a hat, so that no woman's head would be uncovered. (It was ok for the guys to be bareheaded, since it wasn't proper for a man to wear a hat in church.) Then when all was ready, the preacher would begin a prayer, usually something extemporaneous (in other words, prayer off the cuff, not something out of a prayer book). Then the deacons would lift the pall

and hold it up in front of the table, hiding the elements from the congregation. The preacher would then, either from memory or using a Bible, recite the story from the Last Supper which included the Words of Institution: “Take and eat. This is my body which was given for you; do this in remembrance of me...this is my blood which was shed for you; do this in remembrance of me.” When the prayer was finished, the deacons would reveal the elements, uncover the trays, commune themselves along with the preacher, and then each take a tray to begin administering the blessed elements to the congregation—which we received in the pews. What reverence, what awe! But, the fundamental question that arises is this: what did I and everyone else actually receive in our mouths?

I ran across a video this week of a talk given by a Lutheran pastor, and in it he showed a chart, which I found so incredibly helpful and concise in helping to explain a fundamental difference among Christians and our theologies around Holy Communion. The chart had three columns: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed (or Protestant), and the chart attempted to answer this question: after the consecration or blessing of the bread and wine—that’s at least something we all agree on, that at the communion rite, some item representing bread and wine is present—but after the consecration, what do we receive in our mouths. Protestants receive bread and wine that symbolize the body and blood of Christ, it is received in his memory, but what goes into the mouth is simply bread and wine or grape juice. There may be other nuances depending on the particular tradition, but I’m not going to get into all that. Suffice it to say that for Protestants, the ritual act of Lord’s Supper is a memorial of the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. The Lutheran column explained that what they believe that they receive, though still bread and wine, is also the Body and Blood of Christ.

Catholic Christians—by that I mean the Orthodox Church in the East, the Latin Catholic Church in the West, and we Anglicans (Episcopalians)—differ from the rest, because we believe that the two elements that are bread and wine before consecration are no longer bread and wine after. Actually, there should have been a fourth column on that chart from the video with Anglicans wedged in between the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans and in a lighter gray tone, because Anglicans, in proper Anglican fashion, some fall in the more Catholic end, and others

in the more Lutheran end. Let me explain. The Roman or Western Catholic view of what happens upon consecration of the elements is that the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. We also believe that. But Roman teaching has tried to explain how that happens, and we have St. Thomas Aquinas to thank for that. Thomas Aquinas tried to explain how it is that bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Now let's start with Holy Scripture. At the last supper, as described in the Gospels, Jesus said quite clearly when he took the bread, "This is my body," and when he took the wine, "This is my blood." And he told his disciples to repeat the action that he just did as often as they can in his memory and honor. But, again, Jesus declared that the bread *is* his body and the wine *is* his blood. But when we look at what we receive in our hands or drink from the chalice, it still looks and tastes like bread and it still looks and tastes like wine. That's where Aquinas' explanation comes in, and he explained what seemed to be an incongruence using Greek philosophy. He drew upon Aristotle's explanation of matter in terms of substance and accident. The accident of matter is its outward appearance, and the substance of matter is what it really is on the inside. Think about the saying, "You can't judge a book by its cover." The cover may look boring, but the text of the book may be interesting and compelling. You may look at me and make presumptions about me, but the whole of me, who I am, what I think, how I behave, what my personality is in no way defined by the body you see or the clothes I wear. You may get glimpses, but you can't know the real me simply by looking at me. That's kinda what that Aristotelian concept of accident and substance is like. So, Aquinas wrote that although what we see in the consecrated bread and wine appear to be bread and wine, those are only the accidents, but in reality, they are no longer bread and wine, but have been changed into the actual Body and Blood of Christ, fully in body, soul, and divinity. That change that occurs is known as "transubstantiation," but nearly five centuries ago, that word became taboo among Anglicans, and many of the founders and framers of Anglicanism tried to move the Church of England toward a more Protestant view. Like with the Trinity, the Church, particularly in the West, tried to explain with scientific accuracy something that is an incomprehensible mystery. So, what we've ended up with is that we Anglicans/Episcopalians, along with the Orthodox Church, don't worry about *how* it occurs, we just know that it occurs. The Bread and Wine somehow, by the power

of the Holy Spirit, become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. His true and Real Presence are in the elements that we consume. Even at that, some of you may still be thinking, “Well I can get on board with Christ being spiritually present in the Eucharist, but when I take the wafer it still looks and tastes like the wafer, and the wine still look and taste like wine. I’m still not buying that it is his actual body. I’m still not convinced as to how he is *physically* present.”

Well, think about it in this way. You remember from last week, I told you that God is one with three natures of equal substance, and we can see God at work through those natures, but when any “person” of the Trinity acts it is the one God who is acting. God is at all times and in all places always. The early councils of the Church over 1500 years ago, also laid out as Christian doctrine that Christ is fully divine and fully human, inseparable. He is at all times both fully divine and fully human. So, if you agree that Christ is at the very least spiritually present in the Eucharist, and that his divinity and his humanity are inseparable, then if he is spiritually present in the Eucharist in his divinity, then he must be physically present in his humanity. What an amazing gift it is that the same God who created all that is would let himself be held and consumed by his very creation. That’s some kind of love, isn’t it? That’s some kind of love that God would come to us in such a way, no matter what kind of day we’re having, no matter what kind of week we’ve had, despite our shortcomings, faults, wrongdoing, and mistakes, in the midst of good and bad, evil and righteousness. That’s some kind of love that no matter what’s going in our world or the world out there, he deigns to be our guest, and our food, and our drink.

So, why do we celebrate the Body and Blood of Christ with a holy day and with such fanfare? Because we’re ecstatically happy and thankful that the Lord reveals himself to us in the Eucharist. We celebrate the Eucharist on Maundy Thursday, but as Holy Week is still in the confines of a penitential season, we can’t really go all out and treat it like a Feast Day. So the Solemnity and Feast of Corpus Christi is the remake of the Maundy Thursday celebration. The Church in the West has done it for over 750 years. If you haven’t already read the brief history of the Feast of Corpus Christi at the beginning of the bulletin, I encourage you to do so. In fact, you should take it home and read through all the little notes and prayers. You’ll find it both educational and spiritually enlightening.

We're so ecstatically happy that God himself is with us, that we want to proclaim it to the world, and we will do that at the conclusion of the mass when we process the Blessed Sacrament out in the streets. And we'll end our worship today by receiving his blessing. So let us rejoice and be thankful of the gift that God gives us in the Eucharist and in the celebration of his Body and Blood. Amen.

### Resources

Video, "What do we physically receive in the Lord's Supper?"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCCpxM1uMoI>