

COMMUNING WITH JOHN
Sermon for Pentecost 9B—Jn 6:21
LPC, 7/26/15

I want to start this sermon with a little bit of Episcopal 101. For some of you this is old news, for some it is new news, and for the rest, I hope, it is a welcome review. Please take out a Prayer Book, that red book with the gold cross on it, and turn to page 888.

The first paragraph reads, “The Lectionary for Sundays is arranged in a three-year cycle, in which Year A always begins on the First Sunday of Advent in years evenly divisible by three. (For example, 1977 divided by 3 is 659 with no remainder. Year A, therefore, begins on Advent Sunday of that year.)” Does that make some sense? Our most recent Year A was 2013, which divides evenly by 3. Year A therefore began in Advent of 2013 and continued until Advent of 2014. We are currently in Year B, which began in Advent of 2014 and will continue until Advent of this year, whereupon Year C will begin. In Advent of 2016, our next year evenly divisible by 3, we will start again with Year A.

Browse through the next 30 pages or so of the Prayer Book. You will see that for each Sunday of the year there is a psalm and three readings appointed, although sometimes, just to make it confusing (we are the Episcopal Church, after all) there is some choice.

OK, you can close your Prayer Books now. The Sunday Lectionary currently in use varies slightly from the Lectionary you just looked at. In 2006, the Episcopal Church adopted the Revised Common Lectionary, which is substantially the same as the Prayer Book Lectionary, but developed as an ecumenical effort to bring many Christian denominations into conformity. Today, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples, Moravians, even Baptists use the RCL, which is almost identical with the lectionary used by the Catholics. So today, all over the world, Christians are hearing the same Bible stories we heard here: not all Christians, but many.

Year A draws from Matthew for its Gospel readings, Year B draws mostly from the Gospel of Mark, and Year C draws from Luke. John is read sporadically, and is drawn on heavily during Lent, Holy Week and Easter Season every year. Also, during Year B, we get a John interlude during Pentecost. We enter that interlude today, interrupting our Year B journey through the Gospel of Mark.

These readings are from the 6th chapter of John, which is about Jesus feeding 5,000 families with five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus walking on the water, and Jesus’ subsequent teaching. These incidents are paralleled in the other Gospels. What’s unique about John is that he puts them in a profoundly Eucharistic context. In other words, the feeding of the 5,000 is not just another miracle. It is no less than the first communion of the church.

Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, John does not associate the Last Supper with the Passover meal, and he does not use the occasion to have Jesus institute the sacrament of his body and blood. For John, that sacrament begins here, on the green grass. Notice too, that in John the Feeding of the 5,000 is what coincides with Passover, not the Last Supper.

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

Given that we are spending our next five weeks with the sixth chapter of John, with one week's respite when we celebrate St. Lawrence Day on August 9, I plan to present a sermon series on the Eucharist. Based on John's narrative, each week I will focus on another aspect of the Eucharist. The aspects about which I will speak are not unique to John. They appear in the other Gospels as well. But the way John presents the events and teachings in Chapter 6 emphasize these particular aspects.

The first thing I want to say about Eucharist is that Jesus makes it happen. In the story, the loaves and fish are just a modest family meal until they are surrendered to Jesus, in whose hands they become a feast. Likewise, what we have to offer God at this table, this bread that's hardly worthy of the name, this cheap wine, our own broken selves, is nothing, compared with what Jesus makes of it. And it's not our doing. It's Jesus'. Eucharist does not happen because we are righteous and holy and observant. That's the first thing. If you're taking notes write it down. Jesus makes it happen.

The second thing this story tells us about Eucharist is that it is prolific. At least it is supposed to be. When this supper was over, twelve baskets of broken pieces were picked up. With Eucharist there is supposed to be a sort of holy fallout. And amazingly abundant fallout, at that! What is left over after our Eucharist? What do we take from this table and leave in our wake as we leave this place and plow through our week? Eucharist is supposed to have beneficial aftereffects. So that's the second thing. Eucharist is not inconsequential. Eucharist has holy fallout.

I'll come back to the part about people wanting to make Jesus king in a later sermon. For now, let's look at Jesus walking on the water. At first blush this looks like a separate story from the feeding story, but John puts it immediately afterwards for a reason (as, incidently, both Matthew and Mark do too.) John also follows it with a lot more of this "Bread of Life" teaching, indicating that he has not left the "feeding" theme.

I suggest that what walking on water can tell us about Eucharist has to do with power and mystery. In walking on water Jesus clearly has power over the elements, but that's not all. We just can't understand why Jesus has this power, and try as we might we can't explain it.

There are those who explain the miracle of the loaves and fishes by saying that, moved by Jesus' teaching and healing and generosity, each family "discovered" plenty among their baggage and shared it with each other. In a selfish, individualistic culture like ours, that would be miracle enough. But I think the association of water-walking with feeding 5,000 is intended to show us there is stuff here we can't explain. And so it is with Eucharist. We don't know exactly what happens at Eucharist, and it's probably fruitless to try. We just know it feeds us. So if you're keeping track, that's number 3. Eucharist is mystery.

More on this later. Tune in next week, same Bat-time, same Bat-channel.