

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

**STICKS TO YOUR RIBS**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 10B-Jn 6:24-35, 41-51*  
LPC, 8/2/15

I remember a clergy meeting when I worked in the diocese of Washington D. C., which as you probably know embraces many parishes that can be quite close to each other physically. The rector was taking the rest of the clergy on a tour of his church building when one priest in the group noticed a name on a donor plaque. “Look,” this priest said, “John and Mary Doe! They used to be my parishioners!” Another priest said, “You’re kidding! They were members at my parish too!” Whereupon the rector said, “Really? They left here a few months ago because they disagreed with our outreach policy!” A fourth priest replied glumly, “I’ve got them now!”

Apparently this couple was making the rounds, spreading their joy around the diocese. You may know people like this. I’ve known a few in my day, though not so much here in Wheeling.

There are legitimate reasons to switch churches. I’ve done it myself. I do however believe that a repeated pattern of sequential church switching and leaving because of personal differences suggests some kind of problem, perhaps an excess of individualism.

Who judges what right religion is? Before the Protestant Reformation, the answer would have been the Church. The Reformation challenged the necessity of the Church’s mediation for individual salvation. One of the eventual side effects of this challenge was that individual consciences became the arbiters of true religion. We have reached a point where the highest authority most people consult in religious matters is themselves.

Now think about this. If your highest referent for religious truth is yourself, is it really religion? Isn’t religion supposed to appeal to a power and authority higher than oneself?

The Episcopal Church prides itself on being a church where you don’t have to leave your brain at the door. But even we don’t have a brain on the altar, we have a cross. That means God is our highest authority, specifically God manifest in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The church exists to serve God and God’s kingdom. The church does not exist to please you or anyone else.

Frankly, I think the church has from time to time colluded in perpetuating the myth that church exists to please its people. In recent years, with the decline in mainstream church attendance, there has been undue emphasis on pleasing people with the music and décor and language and programs in an attempt to get people in the door and keep them here. Music comes and goes. Programs come and go. Even buildings come and go. But the kingdom of God endures for ever, and that’s where our emphasis ultimately belongs.

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Now, let's relate this to Eucharistic theology, which is the theme for this month. Jesus in today's Gospel reading talks about the food that endures for eternal life, in comparison to the manna of the Exodus. Don't forget that this teaching comes in the immediate aftermath of Jesus feeding the 5,000 families, and that that feeding is the Gospel-writer John's prototype for the Eucharist of the Church.