

Sermon August 16, 2009

11th After Pentecost
John 6:51-58

“In The Flesh”

I was on my first summer placement on a pastoral charge back in 1981 on the Saskatchewan/Alberta border. I left for the day long drive to Calgary and the Annual meeting of Alberta and Northwest Conference of the United Church of Canada. 500 people had gathered in an arena from all over the province.

There was a wonderful mix of ages, gender, colour, language, culture. I remember the deep feeling of joy as we all began to sing together. The power and blessing of the gathered community. The body of Christ – God in the flesh.

In 1988 the General Council of the United Church of Canada met. One of the big issues was the question of whether all persons regardless of sexual orientation should be eligible to be considered for ordination in the United Church of Canada. The gathering heard stories, struggled with God’s will, and struggled with what it means to be the body of Christ – in the flesh. It is when our church has struggled with tough issues and sought to hear God’s will for the Church that I have been most proud of being part of the United Church of Canada, part of the body of Christ, in the flesh.

The 40th General Council of the United Church of Canada has met this past week in Kelowna. There have been opportunities to follow the proceedings through the website with videos on You-Tube and the live feed. My wife Pat has been attending the proceedings.

Stories were told by members of the Native community; the Japanese community; we heard good news stories and struggles of our United Church francophone congregations; we heard from the children and youth attending General Council; we heard the speeches from the candidates for Moderator; we heard a rabbi and a Palestinian leader speak about their pain and struggles and the court wrestled with decisions on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; the Emerging Spirit initiative was discussed; in attendance were a number of guests from our partner churches from around the world.

The gathering sang, worshipped and prayed together.

The body of Christ, God in the flesh, the Church.....

One of the candidates for Moderator in his speech spoke of how the United Church of Canada used to be an ocean liner – large, impressive, but now the boat is smaller, more scuffed up – “we have the feeling that our boat is so small and the sea is so vast.” Christ’s church is a small boat in choppy seas. He ended his message by saying that “God’s mission needs the church.” We are Christ’s church, the Body of Christ, the world needs our witness, our work.

One of the things I experienced in my time in Angola was the importance of the church. People attended worship in huge numbers. One congregation we attended had 1400 people at worship and people who have to stand outside because it is packed inside. The pastor said they celebrated 400 baptisms last year! The worship service lasted 3 hours! There is joy – music and dancing and singing. They are hungry for the gospel, to hear the sermon, the word of God.
The church – the body of Christ – in the flesh.

One of the challenges for the church in Angola is not to lose their prophetic voice – the prophetic voice that speaks out against corruption, violence, abuse, injustice; that speaks of God’s call to peace, justice, reconciliation, that speaks on behalf of the poor, the powerless, the frail, the voiceless.

An editorial piece in The Globe and Mail this week, reflecting on the discussions at General Council on Palestine and Israel said – “The United Church of Canada, which seems to be more interested in social justice than in God”.....

If the church is not about social justice it is not the church – the Body of Christ, God in the flesh.

While the United Church of Canada has been criticized for emphasizing social justice and losing sight of the importance of worship, prayer, spiritual depth, our devotional life, I see the United Church of Canada as finding a better balance of personal piety and social justice.

Jesus’ ultimate commandment to his followers, to the body of Christ is – “love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.”

When we live this commandment we are the Body of Christ – God in the flesh – the Church.

Our Scripture reading from John's gospel today continues to be about bread. Jesus is the bread from heaven that comes down and gives life to the world through his body and his blood. "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

For many of Jesus' followers this notion of drinking his blood and eating his flesh would be repugnant. For Jews this "notion transgresses one of the most fundamental taboos in the food laws of Israel."

As one commentator points out: "The thick reality being communicated here is incarnation. As we read in John Chapter 1 – the word has become flesh and moved in with us. Incarnation is so against our natural, normal, widespread expectation for what is spiritual and religious.

At this point incarnation becomes not only vivid but also repugnant.

We are thus encouraged not simply to follow Jesus, but we are to consume him.....if we are to think about the word made flesh, we must think through ingestion, consumption, intimate, deep engagement. The words used are visceral verbs of chewing and gulping.

Jesus intends to have all of us, body and soul. His truth wants to burrow deep within us, to consume us as we consume him, to flow through our veins, to be digested, to nourish every nook and cranny of our being.

The story is told of the professor at Oxford who was asked – "what is Theology about?" And he answered – "Theology is about everything. Jesus has come down from heaven with the intention of taking it all back. He wants all of us, and he wants us to have all of him."

"Eating and drinking are the very epitome of intimacy and union. Jesus offers himself as food and drink. Here then, is divine self-giving, life for life, and by full participation in Christ's word, his life and his death, the believer abides in God."

In the flesh –Incarnation, in Jesus, God has come down from heaven to live with us.

In the flesh – Incarnation, the Church, the Body of Christ.

The Church, you and I, the body of Christ, God's visible presence in the world – in the flesh. WOW! We are the body of Christ – food and drink offered to the world – the Incarnation of God in and for the world. That's who we are!

In the flesh – God has come down from heaven in Jesus Christ, who offers himself, his body and blood, as life for the whole world. In the Holy Eucharist we feed upon Christ – the bread of heaven that has come down and gives life to the world.

In the flesh – Christ’s Church – the Body of Christ; we become bread that feeds the world. As the Body of Christ we become a body who live the forgiveness and love and justice of God as seen in Jesus.
Amen. Thanks be to God!

#582 “There’s A Spirit in the Air”