

Sermon, 20 April 2008—Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31; I Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Said at the beginning of the service

The heart of the Eucharist is thanksgiving: the deep warm pulsing energy that gives this act its form and life is informed gratitude. We come together to remember Jesus and to give thanks, first for the life of Christ, and second for all the blessings God has given us. The word itself—Eucharist—is an ancient Greek word that means “to give thanks.”

This demonstration, even performance, of our gratitude is not uninformed. The Eucharist is also done, always, “in remembrance.” We remember in order to give thanks. We don’t pretend to be grateful, and we don’t need to make up stuff to be grateful for. Of course, we remember the good poured out on us constantly since the last time we were together. We are given opportunities in the Prayers of the People to name what we are grateful for—and most of us remain silent at that time! But more central is the remembrance of Jesus. The Eucharist is a communal way to recollect who this person we claim we follow was, what informed his life, what he did, and what he left for his disciples and friends to do.

I am going to offer you two ways to do the remembering.

The first is what is called the “four-fold action.” It is called that because it is a single action in four steps. As in a hologram, every unit of the Eucharist contains the four-fold action in its entirety; and the entirety of the Eucharist is a single unit of four-fold action. Over and over in the New Testament we hear that Jesus “took, blessed, broke, and gave” the bread. That is the first thing to track.

The second thing to track is this. Every Eucharist is a remembering, even a reenactment, of the eight days spanning from Palm Sunday through Easter.

Said before the singing of the Gloria

The Word of God—the Entry, Lessons, Gospel, and Homily

The four-fold action:

The gathering of the people is the first step in the four-fold action of the congregation. God has already taken us and collected us into one people. But the four-fold action of the congregation stretches over the entire service. What happens to us in the Liturgy of the Word is that initial taking, prior to blessing. We are being held and recognized as we hold and recognize the words of Scripture, because these are *our* stories.

But at the same time, the four-fold action takes place with Scripture. Reader after reader takes the lesson, blesses it by announcing it, breaks it open by reading it to us, and gives it to us to treasure in our hearts and minds. We make this most dramatically evident in the Gospel, where the sign of the cross is made on the first words of the Gospel reading for the day, specifically blessing those words so that their goodness might be recognized and so that they might become generative and fruitful in us as we receive them.

The eight days from Palm Sunday to Easter:

As soon as I said that the entirety of the Eucharist is a remembering of Holy Week and the entire Paschal Mystery, by which Jesus journeyed through death into life, taking us with him, you will recognize that the opening hymns, the Gloria, the acknowledgement of the opening collect—all these are the excitement of the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. The

ecstasy of praise was sincere. The people of Jerusalem were acknowledging in Jesus God's power to act and to save, and they were both calling on God to do that and giving thanks to God for having done it.

In that excitement, Jesus entered the Temple, where he engaged in an extended exchange of words and quotations of Scripture. That, of course, is what we do in The Word of God: we recall what God said, we wonder what it means, we listen to an interpretation of it.

So let's move forward into this first section of the liturgy, when we gather with praise and listen to Scripture.

Said at the time of the homily

The Word of God—the Creed and Prayers

The four-fold action:

Having broken Scripture open and distributed it among ourselves, we turn to our own lives, and we respond three times to what we have heard in Scripture; twice we respond with speech, once with an action. If this is who God is, then this is what we want to do about it. Aspects of our lives also must be taken, blessed, broken open, and given in light of what we have heard about the Good News. One little formula to sort these out is to consider that the internal active life of a person is made of thinking, willing, and desiring. In the Creed, we crack open our thinking for the sake of God; in the Prayers of the People, we crack open our willing for the sake of God; and in the Offertory, we crack open our desiring.

First comes the Creed, the words of our forbearers in faith. These words are not spontaneous; in fact, they are the work of a committee, and you can still see the ragged edges where they did the stitching. Most important, they are not our personal words, but our acknowledgement of the

strand of Christianity that we belong to. So we take up the life of our mind—we don't take the Creed, to bless and break it—we take up the life of our mind. Then, using these words—not the words we would have invented on our own—we bless the life of our mind by breaking it open to wonder what we could ever say truthfully and confidently about God. We use these words to bless our minds by breaking them out of our overconfident intellectual isolation and satisfaction with our own standards of truth. And once we have taken, blessed, and broken, what we give is our assent to belong to this strand of Christianity.

Next come the Prayers of the People. Here we take up the life of our will: our active pursuits, our actions, the consent to engage and commit ourselves. In the Prayers of the People, we break open in each other's presence and in the presence of God what we are invested in, what we are taking action about in our life, what we are pushing for. This also we don't do alone. We share with each other what we will, so that we can pray for each other, and again break out of our isolation, so that I can will with you what you will—and the blessing also occurs in our giving our individual prayers to each other, praying together on each other's behalf, so that I learn to will what I am unable to will alone. Placing in the presence of God the attachments of our will, learning already be attention in our prayers to place the intentions of my will at the service of others, the next step is to take as our own the words of Jesus to God: "Not my will, not even our will, but yours, be done." This is the blessing and giving that takes place at this moment.

The eight days from Palm Sunday to Easter:

Jesus' disciples responded to what they heard in the Temple debates; they pulled Jesus aside and asked him to reassure them about what was to

come. If the Temple is to be destroyed, what will be our point of stability? So we also, at this point have our own conversation with Christ. By means of the Creed, affirm our loyalty, and during the prayers of the people, present our concerns and our gritudes, to the best of our ability, as we see them that day.

Let's turn now to our response to Scripture in Creed and Prayers.

Said before the offertory

The Holy Communion—the Offertory and Eucharistic Prayer

The four-fold action:

I said that we respond in three ways to what we have heard in Scripture. We open our thinking using the words of the Creed; we open our willing by sharing in the Prayers of the People; but we open our desiring by our gifts at the offertory. Christians have become very canny in our day. In the earliest days of the church, the offertory was the best that had been brought for the holy meal we ate together: the best bread and the best wine were selected by the deacon to be consecrated. In the days of the people of Israel, the best of the flock, the firstfruits of the field, were offered to God. In both cases, it was what was without blemish, what was most desirable, what made your mouth water the most, that was recognized as the goodness God had given us and returned to God out of gratitude for ALL that God gives us. So at this point in the service, we take up our desires, whose symbol in our day is cold hard cash, by which we think we can acquire all we desire—remember we used to offer something alive and beautiful, itself desirable, not the means of acting on desire, which itself has now become desirable—and we break open our desire by a gift to God. At its best, this gift is more than we think prudent, because only then can we call into

question what our so-called discretionary income is actually for; only then can we clarify whether we or our desires is master of our life. So our desiring we also place in the presence of God, in the form of gifts of money and a token gift of bread and wine, and in doing that we break our desiring open so that God can enter it, and bless it, and we can give freely and without fear or resentment.

The gifts of bread and wine now become part of the demonstration of the four-fold action that has been hidden in different other parts of the service. At the Offertory, we take them; at the Eucharistic Prayer, we bless and break them, tearing the bread to bits, pouring out the wine; at Communion we give them. Within the Eucharistic Prayer, of course, we remember that this is exactly what Jesus did at the last meal with his companions, when he himself was so concerned that he not be forgotten, that his work not be forgotten, that his love of God not be forgotten, that he gave them bread and wine, telling them he was giving them himself, and said, “when you do this, remember me,” so that in remembering him we might be blessed and might do the same.

The eight days from Palm Sunday to Easter:

On Wednesday or Thursday of Holy Week, Jesus asked his disciples to prepare a meal that he could eat with them—so that is what we do at the Offertory. We remember that Jesus’ disciples found a room and prepared the food so that they could celebrate the Passover together; so we bring together what is necessary for the meal and set the table. On Maundy Thursday, at supper with his disciples, Our Lord gave thanks and distributed among them bread he called his body and wine he called his blood, and he prayed for them, that they might be one, before they went out—so all of us, following the Eucharistic Prayer with hearts lifted up into the presence of

God, with one spirit, give thanks for all God has done for us, request that inconceivable things be done to this bread and wine, ask God for the grace to be made truly one Body, truly united as the person of Christ, and then pray as our savior Christ has taught us, so that Jesus again is praying.

So let us make our gifts.

Said after the fraction anthem before the words of invitation

The Holy Communion—the Fraction and Communion

The four-fold action:

Of course, at this moment, you have seen the breaking itself. We have taken the gifts of bread and wine. We have blessed them. We have broken them and poured them. We are about to give them. What we think we understand, we do not understand if we cannot see it and hold it as well. What we are doing with bread and wine is what we are to do with every aspect of our life. Everything we are is to be taken up and presented to God. Over everything we are, we ask God to send a blessing. But the blessing that we have been given is given to us so that we can be broken open ourselves. As someone put it once, sometimes we have to be broken so God can get in; you could also say, we can only endure being broken when we know we are already blessed. And, like it or not, our life will be given away at our death, and the happiest lives are those that have made a habit of giving themselves, not out of duty, not as a bargain, but freely and easily, with no thought of exchange and no calculation of return, as we must give ourselves on our last day.

The eight days from Palm Sunday to Easter:

What happens, of course, when the presider lifts the bread and tears it in half is what happened to the flesh and blood of Jesus on Good Friday,

who was lifted high on the cross, broken, for everyone to see. Just as God participates with us, even to death on a cross, even in our own death, even in this broken bread, so we participate in Divinity. And the One who did not know limitation and death, chose to know it in us; and we who did not know power and life, are able to know it in God-with-us.

So come to receive what has been taken, blessed, broken, and is now ready to be given.

Said between blessing and dismissal

The Holy Communion—the Dismissal

For this last series of reflections, I want to reverse the order, to speak about the eighth day first, then about the four-fold action.

The eight days from Palm Sunday to Easter:

Look at the altar. It is empty. That is what the women found on Easter: there was nothing in the tomb. The linen is folded up and set aside, just as Jesus' graveclothes were. So let the church now remain empty as the tomb, when we go out to meet and to be the risen Christ in the world. The Risen Lord himself is in you, ready to go out wherever you walk and work. You are to be the unrecognizable Resurrection to everyone that you walk beside. You are to be the presence of the Risen Lord, smiling, and interpreting Scripture, sitting down to share a meal, letting your own wounds be touched and handled so people can see that it is possible to rise from the grave, breathing out the Holy Spirit onto those you encounter, making the love and life of God known in the breaking of bread together. Every day is now the eighth day of Holy Week: Easter day. When you go out, having received and become the Body of Christ, you yourself are to be Easter.

The four-fold action:

The deep mystery of the Eucharist is what God has done with the congregation. God has performed the four-fold action over us at every Eucharist. God has called us taken from all our walks of life, gathered us together, taken us to himself. God has blessed through the means of bread and wine and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us. God is now breaking us apart, dispersing us to all our different circumstances. And there, where we find ourselves on a daily basis, God gives us into the situations that meet us daily, so we can be conveyors of the blessing we have received that we now carry as a holy infection to spread wherever we go.

The four-fold action is how you imitate God and live Easter wherever you are. Wherever you are, you take what is before you, you bless it with appreciation and attention and gratitude and a word of thanks breathed up to God, then you break it open, so it can be known and shared, and you pass it on, you give it away, you make it available to others, so that those who are hungry for reconciliation and dignity and the love of God and the care of their flesh might be find those things in you. That is the way to live Eucharist in every moment.

You do it without realizing it: every time you breathe, you are already in the midst of the four-fold action. You take air in, you break it apart exchanging carbon dioxide for oxygen, and you give it back into the circulation of the planet. All that is missing is the word of blessing and gratitude. At any moment in your day, you can pause with your breath in you, and say the words of blessing and gratitude, before you exhale. That way, the four-fold action is yours forever.