

Sermon for Corpus Christi 2022

“Behold what we are: May we become what we receive”

Today is an extremely special day in the life of the Church, for two reasons. First, it is Father’s Day and the nurturing of loving parental bonds is a special Christian theme running through our faith and our family lives. Secondly, it is also the day the world-wide Church remembers the most precious gift Christ gave us, the Eucharist – a never ending remembrance of Christ’s body and blood. Over the generations we have chosen to call the Eucharist different things Mass, Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, but no matter which we choose to call it, it remains an eternal banquet that draws us into Christ’s example of service and sacrifice.

This morning's Gospel, from St John, gives us a chance to reflect on how we are formed and shaped by the Eucharist.

When you and I were baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we discovered the deepest truth about ourselves: that no matter what else, we are the Beloved of God.

That is our deepest identity: we are God's Beloved.

Yet it takes a lifetime of practice and prayer, of devotion and commitment to live into the truth of our Belovedness, to make it embodied in everything we say and do, so that in the very nitty-gritty details of our lives, from the moment we get up in the morning until the moment we fall asleep at night, we not only remember in some remote way, “God loves me,” but overtime more and more fully we become the Beloved, we become who we really are. We radiate God’s love. With no personal agendas, no arrogance, no manipulation, but patient, kind, loving accepting and above all else obedient to the people we truly are – a holy people.

In some churches, after the Lord's Prayer, the celebrant breaks the bread and says: "Behold what you are." And people reply, "May we become what we receive." These words can be traced all the way back to St. Augustine, who, sometime in the 4th and 5th centuries, preached a sermon on the Eucharist (Sermon 57). In this sermon St Augustine says: "one of the deep truths of Christian faith: through our participation in the sacraments, we are transformed into the Body of Christ, given for the world." In broken bread and wine outpoured we glimpse Christ's broken body on the cross and see the lengths to which God is willing to go in his parental care for each and everyone of us – an intimate love beyond measure. **"Behold what we are: May we become what we receive."**

The point is that every time we receive the Eucharist, we are transformed -- or should be transformed -- a little more fully into the Body of Christ, so that the divine love that made us and everything around us; that divine love that flows through us and for us can become more fully expressed in the world.

So, how are we formed by the Eucharist? The great 20th Century theologian and writer, Henri Nouwen says, the words "taken," "blessed," "broken," and "given" summarize the life of a priest, because whenever a priest comes together with members of this community and celebrates the Eucharist, he or she takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it. Nouwen goes on to say that these words become our model for living as Christians. As Christians, we are called to become bread for the world: bread that is taken, blessed, broken, and given. To be a Christian is to live a life more fully human – Christ makes us more complete. So these words also then summarize our lives as compete human beings because in every moment of our lives somewhere, somehow the taking, the blessing, the breaking, and the giving should be happening.¹

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992

So, let's think about each of these in turn. What does it mean to say that we are "taken"? To be "taken" by God is to be chosen, to be precious to God. As Nouwen puts it, "Long before any human being saw us, we are seen by God's loving eyes. Long before anyone heard us cry or laugh, we are heard by our God who is all ears for us. Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we are spoken to by the voice of eternal love." Claiming and reclaiming our chosenness is the great spiritual battle of our lives, for in a competitive, power-hungry, manipulative world, it is all too easy to forget that God has taken us, God has chosen us – it's all too easy to slide into self-doubt and self-rejection. Knowing that we have been taken by God, that we have been chosen, is the first thing we need to understand as we **behold what we are and become what we receive**.

What does it mean to recognize that we are "blessed"? The Latin word for "blessing" literally means to speak well of someone or to say good things about someone. We all have a deep need for affirmation, to know that we are valued not just because of something we did or because we have a particular talent, but simply because we are.

Henri Nouwen tells a wonderful story about the power of blessing in his community. For the last ten years of his life, this renowned spiritual teacher and best-selling author who had taught at world-class universities lived as a chaplain at a daybreak community in Toronto, a community for people who are mentally and physically disabled. One day a handicapped member of the community, Janet, asked him for a blessing. Henri was busy and distracted, and quickly and automatically traced the sign of the cross on her forehead. Janet protested, "No, I want a real blessing!" Henri realized how unthinkingly he had responded to her request and he promised that at the next prayer service, he would give her a real blessing. After the service was over, when about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor, Henri announced, "Janet has asked me for a special blessing." He didn't know what she wanted, but

she made it crystal clear: she stood up and walked over to him. He was wearing a long white robe with large sleeves that covered his hands as well and his arms, and when Janet came forward and put her arms around him and put her head against his chest, Henri covered her with his sleeves so that she almost vanished in the folds of his robe.

As they held each other, Henri said “Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house, and all the good things you do show what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.” As he said these words, Janet raised her head and looked at him, and from her broad smile, Henri knew that she had really heard and received the blessing.

After Janet returned to her place, another handicapped woman raised her hand -- she, too, wanted a blessing. She stood up and put her face against his chest, and before long many more of the handicapped people took a turn, expressing the same desire to be blessed.

How hungry we are for blessing! And we are blessed, for God is always speaking a word of blessing in our hearts. When we know ourselves as blessed, we can't help but speak good things to other people, and about other people, and call forth their beauty and truth. As Henri says, “No one is brought to life through curses, gossip, accusations, or blaming... As the ‘blessed ones,’ we can walk through this world and offer blessings. It doesn't require much effort. It flows naturally from our hearts.”

So, we are chosen and blessed. And we are broken, too. Everyone in this room is broken. We all have places of loneliness or fear, places of disappointment, shame, hurt or grief. We all know the pain of broken

relationships, and we all face death, the destructive manifestation of brokenness. Accepting and befriending our brokenness is part of the long journey of entrusting our whole selves to the care of God, so that, as St. Paul puts it, we know that “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's”.² And it is important to place our brokenness in the light of God's blessing, to experience it within the context of God's love. When something ‘bad’ happens to us, it can be tempting to let that event fuel the fire of our self-rejection, to say to ourselves, “You see? Of course that happened to me. I always thought I was no good. Now I know for sure -- the facts of my life prove it.” But when we know ourselves as God's Beloved, we experience our suffering differently -- maybe as a kind of purification, or as a way to enter a deeper communion with a loving God who, in Jesus Christ, allowed himself to be broken.

We are chosen, blessed, and broken -- to be given. “Our greatest fulfilment lies in giving ourselves to others,” writes Nouwen. “...Our humanity comes to its fullest bloom in giving. We become beautiful people when we give whatever we can give: a smile, a handshake, a kiss, an embrace, a word of love, a donation, a present, a part of our life... Many would say that these are marks of a good father, mother, parent, friend... When Jesus says that, ‘those who save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it’,³ this is what he means. How different our lives become when we believe that every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every gift for the good of someone else, every little bit of joy and peace will multiply and multiply as long as there are people to receive it.

That is the promise of the Eucharist: that as we know ourselves to be taken, blessed, broken, and given, we will become bread for the world. Our lives will feed and bless those around us in more ways than we can ask or imagine. In our Eucharist this morning, we see a sign of God's

² Romans 14:8

³ The Gospels of: Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24

desire and intent to feed not only us but this whole hungry world, and in these baptisms, we see the next chapter of God's plan for sharing it.

Behold what we are. May we become what we receive.⁴

R.T. Parker-McGee 2022

⁴ This sermon is based largely on text written by Society of St. John the Evangelist & *Margaret Bullitt-Jonas*