

On any given Sunday in the Episcopal Church, we hear more Scripture read than most any other denomination. We generally hear four readings; usually two from the Old Testament, and two from the New Testament. These passages are divided into distinct sections to provide us with small, digestible portions of the Bible for our edification, and instruction.

Occasionally, the readings are shortened, and altered slightly to make them a bit more readable in public. For instance, this morning the reading from our Gospel book begins, “Jesus withdrew from there....” But if we read this passage straight from the Bible we would hear, “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there....”

This would leave us wondering what Jesus had heard rather than focusing on what the reading has to tell us. Or what was so important that Jesus would drop what he was doing, and go off to a deserted place by himself?

Since our bulletins have an inserted phrase, we know Jesus had just been told of the death of John the Baptist, his cousin, and the forerunner of his ministry. The news of the death may have been bothersome enough, but the manner of the death had to have shaken Jesus.

Perhaps a bit of review is needed here. Previously in the Gospel according to Matthew:

John had been imprisoned by King Herod, but the king was hesitant to kill John because of John’s popularity. Herod had an illicit lover who hated John, and wanted him killed.

During a banquet, after the daughter of Herod’s lover danced for the king, he publicly praised her, and promised her whatever she asked. His lover told her daughter to ask for John’s head on a platter.

In the company of his guests, Herod was forced to honor the request. John was taken from his cell, beheaded, and his head was then brought to Herod to give to the young woman, who then gave it to her mother.

This was the news that caused Jesus to withdraw to a deserted place by himself. The Gospels of Mark, and Luke join Matthew in placing this story alongside that of the feeding of the five thousand. But only Matthew links it so directly. Matthew presents these stories as somehow related. What is the purpose of linking these two stories?

It is clearly one of contrast. Herod's banquet is one of plenty, of dancers, and finery. Jesus' banquet is one of simplicity, of the basic foods of the day.

Herod's meal is one of intrigue, and violence. Jesus' meal is one of compassion, and generosity.

Herod's feast, conceived in wealth, and depravity, ended in horror. Jesus' feast, conceived in tender mercy, and the healing of the sick, ended in blessings for all.

This reality is heightened by the language of this story of the feeding of the five thousand. Listen to the verbs used to describe Jesus' actions. "Taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples...."

Consider these verbs closely: take, bless, break and give. Do they sound familiar? They should.

These four verbs are the basic actions of the Eucharist. The Gospels use this very same language to describe the Last Supper, and the institution of the Holy Eucharist. This basic understanding of how we worship is ancient. This same language

is startlingly close to what Paul describes in First Corinthians as the manner to celebrate the Eucharist.

This is what the Church has done since her birth. This is how the Church continues to worship, and discover Christ's presence to this day. We take the gifts of the people of God, we offer thanksgivings, and blessings for them, we break them that they may be shared equally, and we give them to each other.

This is a sacrament, a mystery where our Lord's presence is made known to us in the physical, mundane things of life. But it is also a profound lesson of our lives together, and our lives with God. We present our offerings to God together. The elements of bread and wine signify our labors, and their fruits. They signify our communal gifts to God where we bring our individual offerings, and present them together.

But we also receive the blessing of God together. Ordination may give me the authority to celebrate the Eucharist, but I am forbidden to celebrate it alone. The Eucharist, and every sacrament of the Church, are communal rites. We are the

people of God, not the persons of God. We make our offerings to God together, and receive God's blessings together as well.

These are just some of the lessons we can learn about our lives together from the Eucharist. But we can also learn a great deal about our lives with God.

The power of liturgy is that its words can bring comfort, and meaning to the many seasons, and aspects of our lives. It is remarkable how the very same words can sound so different at different moments of our lives.

I remember how affecting the words of the Eucharist were the Sunday after I had been diagnosed with cancer; how the hope of the resurrection, and the mercy of God were palpable to me.

I also remember how the very same words resounded with so much life, and vigor 26 years ago, after the birth of my second son, ten weeks premature, as he battled so victoriously to thrive, and grow.

The words of our worship, and the actions of our liturgy are not simply ancient traditions, and rote verses. Instead, they are passages into God's grace where we can find ourselves in the midst of God, and a part of the people of God.

In the offering of the bread and wine we offer our lives, we ask God's blessings upon them, we break them open that the grace of God may flow, and we receive the graces that we discover in ourselves, in each other, and in God.

It is not a mistake that Matthew countered the horror of John's death with the hope of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. It is no mistake that twelve baskets of bread were collected after all were filled. These are Matthew's ways to remind us that, despite the tragedies, and violence of this life, grace abounds, and grace is abundant.