

**The Eucharistic Festival
Saturday, August 29, 2020**

**The Cathedral Church of Saint Paul, Fond du Lac
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When I was a kid we often spent vacations with cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents, and one thing was always bound to happen. If any of us out-of-town kids were anywhere in range, one of the aunts or the grandmas would reach out, squeeze our face lovingly and say, “Oooh! C’mere once and let me look at you!”

Well, I don’t think I was completely obtuse but I didn’t really get the attraction of this. There I’d be, clamped in place, letting myself get looked-at. But all the time I’d be thinking ‘can I go back outside’ where everyone else was running around and pelting each other with dirt clods.

It wasn’t until about forty years later that I realized — what my elders were doing is a pretty good description of prayer. There is God, breaking into our preoccupations, taking our face in his hands, loving on us and saying “Oooh! C’mere once and let me look at you!” And us, for our part, letting ourselves be loved on and looked-at.

When Bishop Matt asked me to preach for the Eucharistic Festival, Covid-19 hadn’t yet radically changed the landscape. But now, whatever other homiletic conversations I might have imagined having, a suddenly-urgent question is filling that space. How do we understand ourselves as a Eucharistic People if we’ve had, and for the foreseeable future will have, little or no access to the most holy Sacrament of Jesus’s Body and Blood?

I’ve shared my little family vignette because I want to place a response to that question into the context of that primary, prayerful movement of God breaking in — to bring us near, and love on us. It’s a Eucharistic vision of being called and received, of belonging, of response, of being seen and known and loved, and finally, of being sent.

St Paul says today, “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’”

I was born into a family, into a matrix of relationships that preceded me and were there to receive me, that carried me, bore with me, and formed me as a person. Upon arrival in this family I was already beloved, already delighted in — I had been waited for, I was here, and I was welcomed. St Paul, too, was received into and received, a tradition that already was before him, and this is what he passes on to us.

As people baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have been born into the family of Jesus by the love of the Father, by the labor of the Son, in the delight of the Holy Spirit. We are born

into a matrix of relationships by a grace that preceded us, a grace that, as Eliot said, “will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere”.

As people of God we have received what was before us, and was handed on to us, and it's these things that have made us what we are. We are a Eucharistic People because God has made us so. It is not the Church that makes the Eucharist, but it is the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Jesus, that makes the Church.

We *do* that because we *are* that. In the one perfect offering of himself on the cross, Jesus has constituted us as his own Body; Jesus makes us bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.

And it's a done deal. We do not cease to be that Eucharistic Body when we are not at the moment celebrating the Sacrament of Jesus's Body and Blood. Our life is now hid with Christ in God, says St Paul — God in whom we live and move and have our being.

I'm sure you've seen those orientation signs in public places that say “YOU ARE HERE” with a red arrow and a dot. Julian of Norwich says that the blessed side of Christ is that dot, the place where we most truly live, and are most truly at home. We are tucked into the spacious, blessed side of Christ together with all the baptized, where, Julian says, there is room enough for all who shall be saved. So the little arrow that says YOU ARE HERE is pointing to that open space between the two halves of the broken Eucharistic Host. You are here. This is where we live, and where we live from, as a Eucharistic People.

And this also places a claim on us. To be a Eucharistic People is to be a people at the behest of an authoritative claim of love. It is to be a people who are subject to summons to be loved-on and looked-at, seen and known. What happens, then, in that seeing? Think of it, the curative, the healing power of truly being seen. In his Pastoral Prayer, the 12th-century abbot St Aelred of Rievaulx asks this of God:

Lord, look on my soul's wounds. Your living and effective eye sees everything. It pierces like a sword, even to part asunder soul and spirit. Assuredly...you see in my soul the traces of my former sins, my present perils, and also motives and occasions for others yet to be. You see these things, Lord, and I would have you see them. You know well, O Searcher of my heart, that there is nothing in my soul that I would hide from you, even had I the power to escape your eyes. Woe to the souls that want to hide themselves from you. They cannot make themselves not to be seen by you, but only miss your healing and incur your punishment. So see me, sweet Lord, see me. My hope, most Merciful, is in your loving kindness; for you will see me, either as a good physician sees, intent upon my healing, or else as a kind master, anxious to correct, or a forbearing father, longing to forgive.

Julian of Norwich says that our courteous Lord will only show us our sins by the light of his radiant and loving face, so that we are able to bear the truth he shows us and be healed. Because when we come together to celebrate the Sacrament of the Eucharist this is one of the things that happens. Facing Jesus, we are also confronted with ourselves, remembering what we have done and are capable of doing as wounded human beings. When Israel was wandering in the wilderness, God let them be hungry and then fed them with unfamiliar manna, not because God needed to know what was in their hearts, but because they did.

And we also need to know. When we find that out, Jesus says, “Yes, that is true — these things you have done, and done to me. But do not be afraid, for I will make all things well.” Julian says that by allowing ourselves to be looked-at and loved by Jesus we will be made whole, made as like to Jesus in character as we already are in nature. Facing Jesus in prayer, as his Eucharistic Body, we too are faced — that is, we are given our faces, our true identity. And then we are taken up by Jesus in his one offering and offered to the Father. We human beings are the treasure that Jesus found and dug out of the field, that he sold everything, and suffered everything to buy. We are the treasure that he continually presents to the Father, rejoicing.

So we are a Eucharistic People bound into a primary, prayerful relationship of vision — of being called and received — of belonging, of response, of being seen and known and loved. And have no doubt, this is still going on continuously, even as we are wandering in a wilderness where we must, for love, be physically separated from one another, and from partaking of the Sacrament of Jesus, for as long as it takes.

It is tempting to say, right about now, that there are no way-markers for this situation, that it is unprecedented, with no signs for us to see and interpret. But our mothers and fathers in the faith would recognize this territory of confusion and uncertainty; they would recognize the fear of being cut adrift from one another and from our sacramental moorings, from the known and the familiar. And they would point us toward those way-markers which they knew well, like these: *I sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me out of all my terror — look to him and be radiant, and let not your faces be ashamed — taste and see that the Lord is good — taste and see, even in this place where the food of the journey is unfamiliar, physically distanced, not what we are used to.*

Jesus is our way, Jesus is the Master of the feast and the Host of the household. So we look to him in the midst of this continuous Eucharist of offering and thanksgiving, of being broken open with him and given to others in new and unfamiliar ways.

So where is Jesus our way right now, but pressing faces maybe unfamiliar to us between his hands saying “Oooh! C’mere once and let me look at you!” We are being sent, as the Eucharistic Body of Jesus, to look where Jesus is looking, to see whom Jesus is seeing, and to love whom Jesus is loving.

The Eucharistic family is expanding, being given their faces. And we, all of us, aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents have work to do.