

**Sermon Preached by the Rt. Rev. Dorsey Henderson
Resigned Bishop of Upper South Carolina
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“This is my Body...this is my Blood”; I speak to you in the Name of God, who abides in us so that we may abide in him: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Beloved, the Psalmist had it all wrong. When he asks, “How shall I repay the Lord for all the good things he has done for me?”, he has it all wrong. His heart’s in the right place—he’s sincere—but he asks the wrong question. Well, perhaps he’s not ALL wrong—but I’ll get back to that.

All wrong or not, I think we can identify with the Psalmist. Especially when we are feeling full of God’s grace, our skies, proverbial and otherwise are blue, we too may wonder how we may repay God for God’s many blessings—“the good things he has done for” us.

Today’s focus is on one of the GREATEST good things God has done for us. Today we focus on the gift of “the bread of life”—the Body and Blood of the Savior.

These words mean comfort and nourishment to us, but they don’t have the same effect on everyone. Not only were those words—“my flesh” and “my blood” confounding to the Jews—but the folks of other cultures found them totally repulsive. Many, hearing that language, concluded that the Christians were cannibals—that the references were to human flesh, human blood, that of mortals.

What do they—these stark, carnal words—what do they mean to us? We’ve struggled to explain them down through the ages, with words like transubstantiation—consubstantiation—real presence. Some—and we have to admire them, learn from them—attempt mightily to construct a rational statement of the essence of the sacrament. But I would wager that most of us, when called upon to state the meaning to someone outside the sacramental tradition, find ourselves not unlike the King of Siam in the musical “The King and I”—“’Tis a puzzlement!” “’Tis a puzzlement!”

We do know, however, what “body” and “blood”—these stark, carnal words—we do know what they mean *FOR* us. We do know what, in today’s Collect, is called “the fruit of (the Lord’s) redemption”.

The forgiveness of sins, for one. Recently someone helped me realize that for the great majority of my time as an ordained person, my sermons have been largely an attempt to persuade good Episcopalians to be **better** Episcopalians. Today’s readings from God’s Word point us to the basic Christian reality that the one who is “the bread of life” sacrificed his body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

So, in the Blessed Sacrament, “body” and “blood”—the spiritual reality caught in these stark and carnal words—give us life—new and eternal life in him. Jesus said it: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven.... (S)o whoever eats me will live because of me.”

What else is done for us when we consume the Blessed Sacrament? Our union with Christ and one another is strengthened and we are given a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life. If this list of benefits seems remarkably similar to those enumerated in the Catechism—well, some of you know one of my guiding principles: All work and no pla---giarism makes me a dull preacher.

Beloved, with such incomparable gifts from God, why wouldn't we join the Psalmist in asking, “How shall I repay the Lord for all the good things he has done for me?” Surely we could be moved to make that effort. But St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus: “For **by grace** you have been **saved** through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works....” God did for us what we could not do for ourselves: he sent his only begotten Son. The Father's gift of the Son, the gift of salvation by **grace** cannot be repaid.

So, despite the Psalmist's good heart, we cannot repay God “for all the good things he has done for us”. But, beloved, we can pay—we can pay those good things forward. Indeed, that is our call, our mission, part and parcel of our abiding in Jesus, and he in us. We can express our thanks to God by paying forward the very same good things which come to us through the sacrament of the Lord's body and blood: paying forward Forgiveness—forgiving as we have been forgiven. Paying forward the life given to us through the Sacrament—as stewards of our resources, utilized for the benefit of others. Paying forward union with God and with one another, even with—*especially* with--those we consider “outcasts” or, for whatever reason, “**those**” people. If we abide in Jesus, we will abide with them.

Sounds something like the Baptismal Covenant, doesn't it? Paying forward our Trinitarian faith...the apostle's teaching and fellowship...resisting evil, repentance and reconciliation...the Good News of God...seek and serve Christ and love our neighbor...strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of everyone. Paying forward our commitment, by the grace of God, to live out more and more faithfully the vows of that Covenant. It was unwitting on his part, I know, but if we insert the word “baptismal” into the Psalmist's commitment to “pay his vows to the Lord”, he wouldn't be “all wrong” as I first asserted.

And in his commitment to “lift up the cup of salvation”—unwitting on his part, I know—and his determination to “offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving”—we have a foreshadowing of our own “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving”: the Blessed Sacrament which, today, we celebrate in word and worship. Surely the Psalmist was not “all wrong”, after all.

Soon we will approach the Lord's Table to receive the Lord's Body and Blood—and, later, to worship the Lord's presence in the liturgy of Benediction. Will we be thinking in terms of transubstantiation? ...of consubstantiation? ...of, even, attempting to understand real presence? I think not. More likely we will be simply eager to abide once again in that which is “true food” and “true drink”—the assurance of the love in which God holds us, manifested in

what comes with that true food and drink—the forgiveness of our sins, union with that loving God, and life—**new** as well as eternal life. At those moments what can we do in thanksgiving for the “good things God has done for (us)? I find the answer in the Psalmist’s commitment and the words of the author of Hebrews: **“Let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe”**. Ultimately, when we perceive the mystery of the Lord’s presence in this sacrament, isn’t that our reaction: “reverence and awe”—reference and awe of a mystery which, like God’s peace, “surpasses all understanding”.

Therefore, Beloved, “we before him bending, this great Sacrament revere....Glory let us give and blessing to the Father and the Son, honor, thanks, and praise addressing, while eternal ages run; ever too his love confessing who from both with both is one”—and who abides in us that we may abide in him: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.