

“Paradox is the footprint of the Divine.” A friend of mine, Sr. Donald, shared that insight with me some years ago and I think it is helpful here. “Paradox is the footprint of the Divine.” Jesus presents a *crucial* paradox in this reading and God’s footprint emerges as we contemplate the mystery of the fully human, fully Divine Jesus claiming to be the bread of life. Frequently, when we encounter a paradox, our minds get to work trying to solve them—to find one or the other of two opposite truths to be somehow *more* true or *really* true. Our tendency is to try to solve paradoxes, but there is something beautiful—something of God’s grace—when we allow paradoxes to solve us instead.

Let me first put this reading in context. John’s Gospel was written during an enthusiastic period of Jewish renewal. Devout Jews in the first century of the Common Era were in disagreement about what it meant to be a faithful Jew. Some had found comfort in the presence of YHWH in Babylon and never returned to Jerusalem. Some were insistent on rebuilding the Temple that the Romans had destroyed for a second time, while others were convinced that proper devotion had moved into the synagogues. John’s community had been barred from the synagogue because they were followers of the Jewish Jesus.

And so “the Jews” who were complaining were a *specific set* of Judeans who were in disagreement with John’s community, most likely those who had excluded John’s community of Jews who had confessed Jesus to be the Messiah. You can see why the people in the crowd are questioning, mumbling and finding it difficult to accept that this itinerate rabbi, Jesus, is the answer to their deepest yearnings and highest hopes. Is he not simply a man? “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”

The claim that Jesus is making is audacious. Incredible. Perhaps even ludicrous. Some of the crowd may even have been offended. They may well have interpreted Jesus’ comments as disrespectful of their sense of God’s glory. We, too, can find ourselves seeking and trusting only those experiences that confirm our certainty that we know God. Often, we seek only confirmation that God is beyond this earthly realm, the mundane life where we struggle and sweat and suffer. And it’s true that

there are moments of God's grace in scripture or in our lives where all we can do is relax our need to explain everything and, instead, simply to fall to our knees in awe of the great "I am." That is right and good, and often the most appropriate response to God's grace and presence. Acknowledging that of the Divine which is beyond us is useful, but we can unintentionally "solve" the paradoxical mystery by over-privileging those moments—by approaching God *only* as the Great Other, beyond our touch, as though that were the only real God.

There's no question that Jesus in our reading today is leaning predominantly on his Divine nature as the Son of God who came from heaven. Notice, however, that the concluding phrase restores the paradox, when Jesus promises that "...the bread that I will give for the life of the world *is my flesh,*" the fully human flesh, that is, that will be nailed to a real and cruel cross.

The Word who once was, now is and will be was made present in a particular first century Jewish man. The extraordinary was made manifest in the ordinary. And God continues to baffle our minds and yet draw us closer with that same paradoxical pattern.

In particular, God is present in our sacraments, where the extraordinary manifests in the ordinary in every Eucharist. Baptismal water that fills the font starts as nothing more than the same Cedar River water that we use to drink and bathe and brush our teeth. The oil we use in anointing begins as nothing more than olive oil with a little balsam added to it. The bread sitting on the platter out in the narthex is made from a simple recipe using flour, honey and olive oil – ingredients available at most grocery stores just like the port in the flagon next to the bread. These everyday things we will use in our Eucharist are ordinary, common and mundane. In one sense, they seem hardly worthy of God's attention, let alone worthy to become the components used by the Creator of the universe.

Yet that is *exactly* our claim. We are audacious enough, willing perhaps even to sound a little ludicrous, bold enough to say that God *does* use such common elements –everyday water, oil, bread and wine – to inspire God's yearning in us and to bring God's grace into to the world. We are bold enough to make this astonishing claim precisely because of the still more incredible, fully human Jesus, an ordinary, mortal person who was also the extraordinary, eternal Son of God.

This is the paradoxical claim that Jesus makes in today's gospel reading, the claim that perplexed some of the people around Galilee and that confounds anyone

who takes it seriously today. We see God in unexplainable strength and in remarkable weakness; we experience God in the incomprehensible power that creates and sustains the universe, and we see God in the familiar vulnerability of old age and new birth. We seek God's justice and righteousness, and are found by God's forgiveness and mercy.

The claim that Jesus makes in today's gospel reading is that God became incarnate—literally, became carnal, took on flesh, so that by becoming like us, we might become like God. The incarnation is a mystery beyond our ability to understand, yet so intimate and ordinary that we take it into our very bodies.

The mystery inspires many Episcopalians to bow at mention of the incarnation of Jesus Christ from Mary, his mother, in the Nicene Creed. We bow in awe and in gratitude because just as God blesses ordinary water, bread and wine, God also blesses and loves each of us, just as we are—ordinary, common yet unique people. In the sacraments, we discover God's promise to abide with us, to love us and to never let us go. We also discover God's inspiring Word that urges us, strengthens us, emboldens us to make use of our skills and talents, inadequate or insufficient though they may seem, to participate in God's creation, redemption and sustaining of all that is. Now *that* is an audacious, incredible and ludicrous promise! But it's a promise we can trust.

God brings about the reign of heaven through flawed priests, exhausted parents and worn-out teachers; through irritable executives, over-worked retirees, and precocious children; through distracted academics, distraught unemployed people and overwhelmed government staff. In the same way that God uses ordinary water and oil, bread and wine to bring God's co-eternal Word to us, so also does God use each one of us *exactly as we are*, to bring forth God's love and yearning for all creation. God uses the ordinary to bring about the extraordinary—that's how we find and follow the footprint of the Divine.

Finding God's footprint in the daily grind can be so very hard at times. So God gave us the Eucharist. Here, each week, we gather in God's presence as a particular Body of Christ—the Divine made manifest. Here, in this place, God is present to us, making good on promises of forgiveness and acceptance, of wholeness and of life. God is present to us through ordinary things that we can hear, see, taste, feel and on some days, even smell. The sacraments lift us from the noise and distractions of life for just a moment, so that in that stillness and quiet we encounter once again God's

audacious promises. Once again, we are filled with God's grace whether we feel or not so that we can go back out into our lives pouring out and radiating God's love, forgiveness and healing for others.

We come each week to hear God's word proclaimed, to play our part in the liturgy and to add our voice to the hymns. We come each week to receive God's sacraments and to be touched by God's presence. We come—body, mind and soul—to receive the incarnate God who takes physical form for us. We come trusting in God's promise to fill us with grace and love, and to use all that we have and all that we are to carry that love out to the world that hungers and thirsts for the bread of life.

Can it be true, the world will wonder, that fulfillment can be found in the presence of a crucified and resurrected Jewish rabbi? Is it possible that this Risen Christ might be found and received in simple bread and wine? Might it be that God has come into our wildernesses like manna dropped from heaven?

And once God draws them with that kind of pondering, the paradox of *your* life—your *ordinary human life* illuminated by the presence of the Divine—*that* will be the footprint that they can find and follow to Christ.