Proper 13 Year B 2021
1 Samuel 17; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

(The Return of Eucharist in-person)

I have so longed to welcome you to the Eucharist! It surely is the food we need and the fellowship that sustains. It is that old definition of a sacrament that goes back to St. Augustine 1600 years ago: a visible sign of an invisible grace. And I certainly need visible, tangible forms of God’s favour, grace, in my life and I think all people and communities do.

Technology can only ever augment what can never be replaced: gathering in person around Christ’s Holy Presence in the Eucharist.

So imagine my surprise when this past week, as I was beginning to consider what this might mean for us, and in the midst of all the crises raging in our world, I saw that the Eucharist was front and centre, on the front page of many of the world’s venerable newspapers!

Of course nothing in the church that makes the front page of the New York Times is liable to be good news and this headline is no exception.

By a margin of 75% to 25% US Catholic Bishop’s conference voted to draft guidelines for the Eucharist, advancing a conservative push to deny President Biden communion, a practicing RC, over his support for abortion rights.

This sets up a potential showdown not only between President Biden and the church but between Pope Francis and the US Catholic Bishops. Pope Francis has warned conservative Bishops to not deny communion for such a reason but conservative Bishops seem bound and determined to use access to the Eucharist in this polarizing, some might even say, weaponized way.

We are indeed at a fraught moment; the polarization that has captured American politics has bled into the global ethos over the past 4 or 5 years was.

Of course polarization is the human norm; democracies have to work hard to keep it at bay but the West’s ability to do so has frayed under different economic and social pressures.

In the worldwide Church we hope, indeed long for, not a fraying but a sign of God uniting with Humanity; of God’s forgiveness of Humanity; of God’s Fellowship with Humanity.

And the Eucharist is maybe our most powerful sign of this hope. But if even *it* is politicized in a polarizing way and wielded as a weapon, is there anything left, anything sacred, anything that can still hold us together?

But before we despair, I believe this is also a moment for reflection and hope for indeed it is at the heart of God’s Good News and the lives of those who receive this good news to live into a different version of politics, the politics of God’s grace.

And, surprise, surprise, we have texts today that open this beauty, this possibility to us, God the Spirit being our Helper!

The story of David’s lament for Saul and Jonathan is the picture of how to honour people we agree with, but mostly who we disagree with, even people who have sworn themselves as our bitterest foes.

David laments the one who tried to kill him regularly; he laments when most people would rejoice because the death of his enemy Saul and his best friend Jonathan ensures that he will now be king!

David is personally magnanimous but also politically shrewd in his lament. He knows that winning over the tribe of Benjamin, Saul’s tribe, will be hugely important for peace

As it turns out, David was never able to overcome the fake news that he had somehow staged a coup against Saul leading to quite a bit of internal violence within Israel.

But treating people the way David treats his fallen leaders helps us understand what is needed to expand the reach of grace and now narrow. When we polarize God’s favour it’s no longer grace but about getting our way to the exclusion of others.

In our second reading we see that God’s politics of grace is of course, practical economics, the thing we need to build a just society and not just lament poetry from ancient times.

And as Paul makes clear, it flows from the Eucharist, the gift of Jesus’ own self; “for you know,” he says, “the generous act (in Greek it’s generous grace) of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Scholars of Paul’s work and writing are united in their belief that while he was travelling around the Mediterranean basin establishing little beach heads of faith for what would be become the most transformative movement in world history, he was not merely spreading ideas or doctrine but rallying all these new believers in Christ to give generously to a grand project.

The grand project was a collection to help the believers in Israel who were suffering from famine. And here’s the kicker, many of these Jewish believers in the Messiah did not believe that you could be a Gentile believer in Jesus unless you agreed with Jewish religious laws.

In other words, the same kind of polarization that could have ripped apart ancient Israel and that is threatening to tear at the worldwide church today was threatening this new thing, this universal gospel.

Selfishness, getting our own way robs the world of the fairness and equity that is God’s will and God’s desire for all. The very definition of God’s generous grace in Jesus is that which puts the question to all political, economic systems, even all religious understandings.

It’s not theory that counts but practical fairness so that it is demonstrated that “the one who has much does not have too much and the one who has little does not have too little.”

Which brings us to our gospel text. Right off the bat we recognize that it is speaking to us of something that is bewildering and awesome to us; a power we long for but know we don’t have on our own.

What is Jesus really doing here? He’s healing in extraordinary ways, and I don’t diminish that, however sceptical I may be of many miraculous claims.

But in a way that connects to our theme, Jesus is also orienting his disciples and us towards the kind of grace we see in our first two readings.

The daughter of the powerful man, Jairus and the anonymous woman are equal in the face of God’s desire for life and vitality.

Both stories speak to how we are invited into God’s politics of grace, no questions asked, no social conservative commitments are asked for in advance!

There is no asking of Jairus or the woman where they stand vis a vis Jesus or, just as importantly, where they stand vis a vis certain hot button issues of morality like abortion, same-sex marriage or whatever the equivalents were in that culture.

Chances are that Jairus and Jesus are on opposite sides of many religious questions. Jairus is of the class that Jesus regularly spars with. It’s highly likely that Jairus does not “get Jesus” and he certainly would not have agreed with Mark’s portrayal of Jesus flouting cleanliness laws and/or Sabbath rules. And yet desperation has driven Jairus to Jesus.

We don’t know anything about the woman except her faith, again, no precommitments required to experience and engage with God’s power and favour.

This is huge for us as a community! As we rebuild, redevelop and reengage these are the fundamental Eucharistic foundations that invite us once again. Being away from this for so long gives us an opportunity to reexamine why we do it, what it means for us personally and for us communally.

In the face of all that has gone on for us personally, in the face of the polarization of our wider culture and the extreme challenges faced in our world we have a new opportunity to engage, not in theory, but in the real thing.

Will you reengage with grace? Will you put your trust in God’s favour, God’s inexhaustible love and forgiveness towards you? Not in some abstract way so I need to ask you a second question

Will you/we receive and then offer this favour, this God defined fairness and equity towards others, no preconditions? Will you/will I help rebuild, redevelop this parish towards that end? To do so is the Eucharist’s purpose!