

The Rev. Carol Duncan
First Sunday of Christmas, Year C
December 29th, 2024

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. Let it be. Amen

My dear friends, this is my last sermon as your Deacon. It gives me a chance to share the heart of my faith with you. You will recognize Richard Rohr's influence. Before that, when I was in my early 20s, I was blessed to have Father Dennison as Rector of my church in Ohio. He frequently told friends that he was always late because he always enjoyed where he was so much. He practiced, in the late 60s, the ministry of presence. His lifestyle of loving his neighbor, all his neighbors, formed the foundation of my faith life. Today's Gospel is the perfect platform to share where I have grown from there. The Gospel is John's version of the Christmas story, told from God's point of view.

"All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

As it says "without him not one thing came into being", and "what has come into being was life" I understand that my life is continually renewed through Christ by intercession of the Spirit. Not just at conception, but in every breath I take. Every breath is given from God to sustain my life. Every breath is relationship and prayer, whether or not I am conscious of it.

All our lives come from God. We come from God, live in God, and return to God. Our response and gratitude for the gift of our lives knits us into the eternal Body of Christ.

Being members of the Body of Christ is not just a doctrine of the church that we are required to accept. It is a holy mystery that gives ultimate meaning to our lives. We dwell within Christ's Body in this life and beyond death. That mystery is our light and our life as John says. No darkness or estrangement or depression or absence from church can quench it, because God resides in us. We are created uniquely in the image of God through the breath of the Holy Spirit spoken by Christ the Word.

John, writing his Gospel, realized that on its own this mystery would not be grasped by its hearers. So he added a human element to translate the message. John the Baptizer is a human lens to capture God's creation vision. The Baptizer is like a magnifying glass focusing the sun onto kindling to light a fire. Then John the Gospeler is filled with existential grief as he realizes most of his hearers would not comprehend his message. But then John's mystical joy

counteracts grief. Those of us who do receive Christ into our lives are born into being members of Christ's body. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. This mystery is for everyone whether they are Episcopalians or not. It's just a little easier for Episcopalians because we have the sacrament of the Eucharist, and we don't have to accept that the elements are actual human flesh.

Every Sunday we receive this grace as we are mystically knit into the Body by receiving the bread and wine of the Eucharist. When Jesus became human, he emptied himself of divine glory. God compressed eternity into linear time and molded infinity into flesh. This miracle is often too much to comprehend for us, even though we try to believe it.

Jesus becoming human, however, is perhaps a lesser miracle than God creating and sustaining our universe and all it contains. In that range of miracles, accepting the miniscule miracle that God is immanently with us in the bread and wine can be nearly invisible unless we realize what is happening. The Eucharist is the Triune God, emptying themselves anew to become a wafer and a sip of wine. God empties Godself so that we might be filled with the miracle of living in Christ's body.

On Christmas Eve more than 300 people came to the five o'clock service. I moved from kneeling person to kneeling person handing each a wafer of bread with the blessing "Receive the Body of Christ, the bread of life." Many of the people were unknown to me. This sacrament may be the single time in a year that they experienced the miracle of feeling themselves at one with Christ's body, becoming fully alive. It was exciting for me, almost like assisting at a birth. One time or many, all are enfolded into the body and loved.

I have mentioned in other sermons that part of the miracle for me is that your face, as it responds to the love in the bread I place in your hands, glimmers with the image of Christ in you. The face of Christ is infinite. Your face portrays that holy face, especially when you are aware of the miracle each time. Love is born anew in you.

So when you pray through the rest of the service this morning, I hope you are able to exult in the awesome act that is taking place. I pray that it will awaken in you a sense of the constant renewing of yourself as an essential element of the Body of Christ, without which that Body is incomplete. Let go of your common sense, let go of your inner distractions, until you are only aware of the miracle of relationship with the Holy and with each other.

One more thing I want to share with you in this, my last sermon. It is James Finley's Breathing Practice from the Center for Action and Contemplation.

In this contemplative practice, sit and renew your awareness that you are sitting in the presence of God all about you and within you. As you inhale, inhale God's silent "I love you," in which God is being poured out and utterly given away to you as the miracle of your very life. Then when you exhale, exhale yourself in love: "I love you." And so, we are breathing along with God, in "I love you. out I love you. in I love you. out I love you." From the reciprocity of love, destiny is fulfilled, and the foundations of suffering are healed.

I have been so blessed these twelve years to serve as your Deacon. I leave us in the very capable hands of Laura and Luke, and our Rector to be, Mary Barber. We are all blessed to be members and friends of St. Martins.