

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, June 19, 2022
Corpus Christi

Solemn Eucharist
11 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*
on
Citations
+

“Become what you see, and receive what you are.” *St. Augustine of Hippo*

This week, former Vestryman and Pulitzer Prize winner Jon Meacham and I have been in touch. I decided to read his fairly recent book on the life of the late Congressman John Lewis titled ‘His Truth is Marching On.’ Growing up in segregated society; regularly witnessing brutality against people of color, brought to a head when Lewis led the march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, in 1965, one might assume that he would have proposed a violent response to years of discrimination and injustice as being the only way forward. Instead, throughout his life, Lewis continued to teach and to preach the way of non-violence as the best way, in fact, the *only way* to make things change. Why? Because it is the way of Jesus – it is the way of the Kingdom of God, and it is at the heart of what the Church, as Christ’s Body, is called to be.

On March 30, 2008, John Lewis preached at the National Cathedral in Washington - 40 years since Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had preached in that same pulpit. He chose the same text from the Book of Revelation: “*And I, John, saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of Heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men.’”* (See Revelation 21:2-3a). He went on to emphasize that the tabernacle that is described as coming down from heaven is intended for *men* not for God. In other words, God chooses to dwell with his people; to make his home with them; and that is why Christians are called to search for unity, truth, and justice. Speaking of other great leaders pressing for peace, for environmental justice, and for human dignity, Lewis said this: “*They are saying that it is our responsibility; it is our duty; it is our job to create the tabernacle here on earth. We are the children of God and as people of faith we are called actualize the fruits of the Spirit to make them real in our nation, in our government, and in our own lives.*”¹

Meacham tells the story of a young man whose grandparents were born into slavery with a compelling urgency and, in his epilogue, asks some hard questions about the lack of a pace of change in American Society towards true inclusion. After telling John Lewis’ story, Meacham says this, “*It can be easy to consign the philosophy of nonviolence to history. And it’s easy to dismiss warm words about John Lewis as gauzy and sentimental. But before waving his story off as a Sunday school lesson, consider this: did his life have consequence? Do we live in a better or worse nation because of him? If the answer to the latter is that the America of today, for all its injustices, is more just than it was when, in the winter of 1959 to 60, Lewis walked out of American Baptist Theological Seminary’s Griggs Hall on the hill overlooking the Cumberland River in Nashville and decided to take a stand by sitting in, then his story should be told as long as the Republic endures – and beyond, for if the Republic were to fall, it might well rise again if enough of us were to conduct ourselves as the sons and daughters of the civil rights movement did.*”²

To conduct ourselves as the sons and daughters of the civil rights movement did. The way of non-violence is the way to build the Beloved Community.

Today is not only Juneteenth, it is also the feast of Corpus Christi. For us, as the Church gathered here in Saint Thomas, we are called to become more Christlike in our words, in our actions, in our thoughts, as well as in our prayers. The Church *is* the Body of Christ because Jesus gave himself for the Church and continues to give himself in the sacrament of his body and blood. That sacrament has many names, but it is principally the sacrament of unity – a mystery or sign of God’s presence here on earth. When the church is divided, when Christians fall out with one another; when the church does not show forgiveness; when the church does not speak out against injustice or inequality; when it fails to live up to the promise of the Baptismal Covenant to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being;” in other words, when the church does not practice what it preaches, then it fails to be the mystery – that is, the *sign* of God’s presence with his people.

Preaching to the catechumens – those preparing for baptism – St. Augustine taught them to understand the Eucharist only through understanding the Church as the Body of Christ. Reflecting on St. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, Augustine said this: *“If you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle [Paul] speaking to the faithful: You are the body of Christ, and its members [1 Cor. 12:27]. ... When you hear “The body of Christ”, you answer, “Amen.” Be a member of the body of Christ, so that your “Amen” may be true! What then is the bread? ... It is one body formed of many. Remember that bread is not made from a single grain, but from many. When you were purified, you were ground. When you were baptized, you became dough. When you received the fire of the Holy Spirit, you were baked. Become what you see, and receive what you are.”*³

Become what you see, and receive what you are.

When we receive Holy Communion, we become truly part of the Body of Christ; when we return to our seats, or gather at coffee hour, or walk down the 5th Avenue steps after mass, we put into practice the words of St. Thomas Aquinas’ great collect for the Holy Eucharist. *“grant us so to reverence the sacred mysteries of thy body and blood that we may know within ourselves and show forth in our lives the fruits of thy redemption.”* Our reverencing of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist is, therefore, not an end in itself, but a means to an end – that is, to become united in Jesus Christ and for that union to make a difference to our lives. Another way of putting it is to think of the words from the choristers’ prayer that our Head of School reflected on with the choristers who were leaving us last week, – *“Grant that what we sing with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth and practice in our lives.”*

Otherwise, our reverence of the sacred host can so easily become a form of idolatry – the same idolatry that the Reformers of the 15th century protested against. When our celebration of the Eucharist becomes detached from our fellowship with the rest of the community of faith, we cannot be truly incorporated into Christ. We are called to recognize Christ in one another despite our differences, otherwise the mass becomes stripped of its power. If we cannot do that with those sitting in the pews around us, how can we take Jesus into the world in which we live? The great Fathers of the Church, including St. Augustine, but especially St. John Chrysostom, berated the followers of Christ for failing to discern the body outside of the Eucharistic species of bread and wine. Chrysostom famously said to his flock, *“If your soul remains viler than lead or clay, what good does it do to have a golden chalice? Do you wish to honor the Body of Christ? Then do not disdain him when you see him in rags. After having honored him in church with silken vestments do not leave him to die of cold outside for lack of clothing. For it is the same Jesus who says, “This is my Body” and who says “You saw me hungry and did not give me to eat – what you have refused to the least of these my little ones, you have refused it to me.” ... What God wants is not golden chalices but golden souls.”*⁴

That brings us back to Juneteenth, my friends. Our celebration of Corpus Christi is a celebration of the Church as the Body of Christ. And the Church as the Body of Christ in the world, is called to be witnesses to the love of Christ in that world – to glimpse the ‘tabernacle of God with men’ if you will; to make a

difference to that world. This comes about *because* of our veneration of the Lord's Body and Blood in the Eucharist, not in spite of it. As we will soon hear at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, "*Grant, we beseech thee, that all who partake of this Holy Communion may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, and be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction; and also that we and all thy whole Church may be made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.*"

That he may dwell in us, and we in him; or, as St. Augustine said, **"Become what you see, and receive what you are."**

In so doing, we will begin the faltering steps to building the Beloved Community where, as St. Paul said, "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:27-28)

**O sacred banquet!
in which Christ is received,
the memory of his Passion is renewed,
the mind is filled with grace,
and a pledge of future glory to us is given to us. Alleluia.** ⁵

¹ *From a Sermon preached by Congressman John Lewis in the National Cathedral, March 30, 2008.*

² *'His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope,' Jon Meacham, Random House, 2020. Page 243*

³ *Augustine, Sermon 272 (On the day of Pentecost – To the Catechumens, Concerning the Sacrament)*

⁴ *John Chrysostom, Homily 50 on Matthew Chapter 3.*

⁵ *St. Thomas Aquinas*