

Living Eucharistically, Epiphany 4(C) – 2016

Written By The Rev. J. Barrington Bates, Ph.D. | [Leave a Comment](#) |

[RCL] [Jeremiah 1:4-10](#); [Psalm 71:1-6](#); [1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#); [Luke 4:21-30](#)

Baptism is an amazing gift and an awesome responsibility. We Christians are set apart, commissioned, and ordained to boldly confess Jesus as Savior, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to seek and serve the Christ in everyone we meet.

And we can see this theme reflected in today's gospel passage. Jesus picks up a scroll in the synagogue and reads from the Prophet Jeremiah:

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

Now, that is living baptismally! As one whose job it is to help put the world to right.

Jesus, of course, will go on to preach good news to the poor, to heal the blind, to set many of the oppressed free, and to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of righteousness. He understood what it is to live baptismally. There's also another big piece of the journey for sacramental Christians: living eucharistically.

Living eucharistically means much, much more than coming to church and receiving communion. That's how we gain the sustenance to live eucharistically, but it is not living eucharistically. Living eucharistically is to live a life of gratitude. That's what “eucharistic” means. Living a life of thanks, appreciation and positive reception to the world around us.

It's really difficult to do this. We live in a world that is full of suspicion, full of hatred, and full of fear. And don't be confused: there are things of which we by rights are suspicious, things we should hate, and things we must fear. But there are also times when our blindness to the truth prevents us from seeing the good in everyone and causes us instead to seek out what we see as evil.

We are not alone in this. We humans have been doing it for centuries. Like in today's gospel. Jesus proclaims what must seem like a pretty harsh truth to the people in that synagogue. They don't like it, they don't agree with it, and they don't want to hear it. And so they become filled with rage and they drive him out of the town, prepared to hurl him off a cliff. They are not living eucharistically. Instead, they are seeking to sort out the things that trouble them, the concepts that offend them, the words that they consider an affront. They had a choice, and they chose a path of destruction.

Living eucharistically, on the other hand, would call for them to look for the signs of the coming of the kingdom of heaven, the concepts that inspire them, and the words that give them hope. Living eucharistically would call for us to listen carefully for what resonates with us in a sermon, in a hymn, in a scripture reading—and then living into that truth from God. Living eucharistically means putting aside our critical nature, leaving behind the things that upset us, and finding a way to be grateful.

This life of gratitude begins with a shift in how we see ourselves, others, and the world around us. It means no longer being content with fast-food spirituality that makes us feel good in the moment but leads only to chronic disease, discontent, and disappointment.

Instead, living eucharistically means investing ourselves in the sustained bread breaking of authentic and attentive prayer, mindful and deliberate service, and careful and sensitive listening. As the late Alex Haley, the author of *Roots*, once said, he strove to live his life by these six words: “find the good and praise it.”^[1]

“Find the good and praise it.” And, sometimes, what is good for us, what we really need, what we have to confront: sometimes, this is something painful. Paraphrasing Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance, racial justice requires the complete transformation of social institutions and a dramatic restricting of our economy, not superficial changes that can be purchased on the cheap. That is a truth that hurts. But accepting that basic tenet leads to something quite wonderful: coming even closer to the bringing of that promised kingdom of God here on earth. “Find the good and praise it.” Just as we cannot find buried treasure without doing the hard work of digging a hole, we cannot grow spiritually if we are unwilling to confront our own stumbling blocks.

Perhaps it is helpful to remember that the gospel writers were not like us. They were not interested in facts, exactly, although very much interested in truth, and not much interested in details, really. This is especially helpful to remember this as we read the gospel narrative on Sundays. It probably never occurred to them that we would add chapter and verse numbers and divide their narrative into little snippets and read just a bit here and there. So it may be well to remind ourselves of just what scripture, exactly, Jesus is claiming is fulfilled in their hearing in that synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. We heard it just last week, you may recall. From the book of the Prophet Isaiah:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Now the Nazarenes may well be astounded that this young man they knew as Joshua, could read at all. It was not the usual thing, of course, for people to read, let alone the children of menial workers — isn’t this Joseph’s son, they ask. But, we imagine they are also astounded at what he chose to read: the very promises of salvation. Is Jesus proclaiming himself as a prophet, as great as Isaiah and Elijah? Is Jesus bringing the ancient Israelite prophet’s words into that first-century assembly? Or, is Jesus announcing that the kingdom of God has come very near? Well, perhaps all three. And even more.

By choosing to read from the prophet, rather than the law, Jesus has already aligned himself with a particular party within Judaism. We know, over time, he will continue to distance himself from the lawgivers: the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees, to be more precise. And he has also chosen to align himself with a particular wing of the prophetic party — for he has not chosen to lament, with Jonah, or to chide, with Jeremiah. He has chosen to proclaim hope for a better tomorrow. He has chosen to find the good and praise it. He has chosen to live eucharistically. And he does so using an ancient text. He does not need to be inspired by the Spirit to create it; he needs not compose the words; he is simply the living, breathing mechanism for proclaiming God’s word. He finds the words on

the page and reads them aloud:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

And in this act, he breathes new life into that text. You can almost imagine the bated breath, the hair standing up on the back of someone’s neck, the racing heartbeat—as if to say, “Wow, that’s part of our scripture? Our tradition says that?”

So, Jesus reads these words, proclaiming himself as a prophet, as great as Isaiah and Elijah, bringing the ancient Israelite prophet’s words into that first-century assembly, and announcing that the kingdom of God has come very near. With these words Jesus is calling us to be prophets ourselves. To live eucharistically, a life of gratitude and thanksgiving. To breathe new life into the ancient words of Scripture. To “find the good and praise it.”

Written By The Rev. J. Barrington Bates, Ph.D.

The Rev. Dr. J. Barrington Bates currently serves as interim rector of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Essex Fells, New Jersey. He is also Church Review Editor for the journal “Anglican and Episcopal History.”
