

Baseball season reminds me of the one of the two things I miss the most about having moved to Arizona from Chicago: going to a few White Sox games every year. (The other, it may not surprise you, is going to Illinois basketball games). I root for the Diamondbacks, but I am not really attached to them. Another thing that I miss is the omnipresent Greek cafe. They are a staple in the greater Chicagoland area, where many Greeks came after World War II. The Athos here in Florence is a partial exception, but “partial” because it is more of a restaurant and does not serve breakfast; There is a really fine Greek *restaurant* in Catalina, but I miss being able to have a gyros omelette, and to see that gyros meat on the spit.

Speaking of “Greek,” come to think of it, another thing I left behind was the extension program of the University of Chicago, where, not much more than a mile from where Patricia and I lived, one morning a week I would go to a three hour class, and for four years those classes included my first real introduction to something else Greek: the ancient Greek philosophers and story tellers, dramatists and historians who contributed so much to what we label as *Western Civilization*. Their profound impact, carried far out of the peninsula through the conquests of Alexander the Great, whose personal tutor was the great philosopher Aristotle, influenced even the Palestinian Hebrew culture in which Christianity was born as well as the eastern Roman empire into which Christianity originally spread.

Indeed, because of Alexander’s impact four hundred plus years earlier, the entire New Testament was written in the Greek language.

I often speak of our need to understand the conquest of Judah by Babylon, in 589-587 BCE, and the subsequent liberation of the Jews by Cyrus the Great fifty years later, in order to understand the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. I seldom deal with the next five hundred years and the relative immiscibility of the culture of the Jews freed from Babylon with the culture brought later to the Holy Land by Alexander and by the largely Greek and ultimately Roman rulers. Such things as the Greek practice of athletic games being contested in the nude did not go over well with the Jews, just to cite one example,

so there was a tension between the two cultures even as elements of the Greek filtered into and affected the Hebrew culture.

Now, I go through all this Greek food and Greek culture for the simple reason that the Gospel of John is probably the most *Greek* of our four versions of the Gospel in terms of the manner, especially of the imagery, with which it tells the story it presents, such as in this week's reading in which Jesus compares himself *metaphorically* to the food, *mana*, which God provided to the Israelites during the *Exodus*, their forty year trek through the Wilderness.

To me, that our ideas of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper are influenced by the Gospel of John are unquestionable, *even though* in the Gospel according to John we do not actually encounter the Lord's Supper, which was clearly practiced by Christians by the time John was written.

We do not encounter the Sacrament itself in John, yet it is the imagery in John compared against the Greek culture in which it circulated that brings a thought to me that I think is relevant: Jesus as "the bread of life" and a path to God, "eating Jesus flesh," is a complete departure and rebuttal of an assumption from Greek legend and mythology; it is, I think, a statement of the radical difference in the world made by Jesus, his life, death, resurrection, and his teachings.

I have chosen not to go into detail because of the age of some of our attendees, but a story assumed to be known by all Greeks and thus background for plays by all three of the greatest Greek dramatists (from the century before Alexander) concerns troubles visited on the descendants of the House of Atreus. The most prominent of these was Agamemnon, who led the Greeks in the Trojan War — fought over the abduction or seduction of his brother Menelaus's wife, Helen — and whose mistreatment of Achilles led to "the rage" of Achilles, which "rage" is the introduction to, and the reason Achilles is pouting most of the ten years of the Trojan War in, Homer's *Iliad*, written, or at least recited, more than seven hundred years before Christ. The House of Atreus's troubles

were visited on them because on two occasions, a member of the family deviously caused other members to, well, unknowingly as they ate but then finding out, to engage in *cannibalism*. Indeed, another instance of cannibalism is recorded by Herodotus in his travels in Persia; it was not a topic of which Greek culture was ignorant.

Now, whether the House of Atreus or Agamemnon or Achilles or even the Trojan War itself are historic realities is immaterial; my point is that the Greek culture abhorred and recoiled from *cannibalism*, the idea of eating human flesh, and regarded it as a just cause for punishment from the Greek gods. Ancient Greek food did not properly include other Greeks!

So one can imagine the scandal greeting the idea of following the Son of God as “the bread,” and by “eating the body of the Son of God” as part of the way of being faithful that this new religion, this off-shoot of Judaism, presented. Rather than to incur the damning by the panoply of Greek gods that did the House of Atreus, in John, Christians were told to “eat” by the Son of God himself! The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper must have been to the Greek culture like being poked in the eye as had been the Cyclops with Ulysses’ spear in Homer’s other epic.

I am not going to argue for or against Transubstantiation, the belief of Roman Catholics — and I believe many Episcopalians — that we all respect, which holds that within the Sacrament, the bread and wine become *the body and blood* of Christ. I myself am what is considered a “minimalist” and a good Presbyterian; I see the elements as remaining as bread and wine or, as today, juice. But if Christians cannot gather around the Lord’s Table despite some not-so-central doctrinal differences, where can they gather? We all do believe that Jesus is present as we so gather.

No, what I do want to emphasize is this: from our earliest Christian roots, which were much influenced by the Greeks and by their use of imagery, we Christians have not simply fallen in line with the prevailing culture, Christians have challenged it! Paul wrote, well before the Gospel of John took form:

*For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [I Corinthians 1:22-24 (NRSV)]*

And what was bolder than the the ideas of forgiving one's enemies, of knowing forgiveness of one's own sins, of loving all of God's children.

In an era when politicians either call those with whom they disagree "stupid" or defend themselves by saying all others are "partisan," I hope that you and I as those who eat figuratively — I am not sure anyone one does it quite literally — who eat figuratively of the body of Jesus Christ, the bread of life, will not shy from conflict, peaceful conflict, with all that is wrong about the culture we inhabit and the world in which we live, and that we will carry forward not so much a spear to poke the culture in the eye, but instead carry within us Jesus himself, and make the love of God known to us through him available for all the world to see.

To see, and, figuratively, to taste, to taste and to share this new Greek cuisine: the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

Amen.