
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Eucharist

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

We talk about the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist because the practice comes from the ancient ritual of sacrifice.

The Passover sacrifice was the central ritual of the community. When the priests sacrificed lambs in the Temple, they killed the animal and sprinkled its blood against the altar. Then, they returned the body to those who had offered it, so that it could be eaten at home as part of a family feast.

When he says, "This is my body," and "This is my blood," Jesus is interpreting his death in light of this ritual. He is about to become a sacrificial victim, but it will be a sacrifice to end all sacrifice. Just as the people took the step of sacrificing animals instead of humans, so the disciples should take the next step and eat this meal rather than killing anything at all.

It's a question of how to define the community. As Mark Heim puts it, "Sacrifice and the meals around it were the sacred glue that held the social order together." This is why Jesus got into so much trouble by eating with tax collectors and others who would not have been allowed to sit down at the table of a reputable family.

Jesus is reminding the community that it derives its identity from life, not death. When he overhears the disciples being asked why he eats with such disreputable characters, Jesus responds, "Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice." He is quoting the prophet Hosea, who said, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

Do you remember when your mother went to see your fifth grade teacher to ask about bullying at school? The teacher told your mother that he didn't have a problem with bullying in his class. And, neither did any of your other teachers.

He said that whenever anyone began to pick on someone else, you stepped in and started hanging out with the person being picked on. You were the cool one, and everyone wanted to be your friend. So, instead of joining the bully and turning on the targeted kid, they joined you and included the targeted kid as part of the "in" crowd.

When we talk about the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist, then, we are substituting a common meal for the cultic rite of animal sacrifice.

We are gathering together around the table and identifying ourselves with all of the victims of violence and exclusion.

We are reminding ourselves to keep doing just what you did in those fifth grade classrooms – building community on a foundation of mercy, and not sacrifice.

I thank you for your example, more than you know.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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