The last time I preached here at Christ Church a parishioner asked me why I didn’t base my sermon on the day’s lessons. Well, the simple fact is that it isn’t actually a requirement. This part of the service is called the Liturgy of the Word, and it begins with the Old Testament and moves toward something from the Gospels, but it doesn’t end there. The final lesson, if you will, comes in the form of words based on our lives today: the sermon. In that way, the Liturgy of the Word goes from the oldest messages to the most recent. And sometimes the message that must be heard on any particular day deals more with our lives than the experiences of those who lived perhaps at least two millennia ago.

But today I am preaching on is what you’ve been hearing from John’s Gospel for the past few weeks, and for some very specific reasons that deal with why we are here today, in this time and place, to do certain things as a community.

There’s a tendency—for some a real need—to look for the answers to life’s questions in scripture, though the Bible wasn’t written as a collection of answers, but of deeds and ideas, sometimes cast as laws for ancient societies. The Bible is, among other things, a chronicle of the relationship humankind has experienced with God, in the myriad ways this has unfolded over thousands of years. But like most ancient chronicles it is a highly edited and redacted document, also losing some meaning in translation, and seldom giving us clues about how spirituality, culture, or even politics have affected what we read. That is, we aren’t readily able to see things as they happened or to understand why they happened. We only see distant reflections that can be distorted and sometimes quite confusing. However, occasionally what we hear in the gospels touches us in ways that are immediate and transformative, in spite of how they came to us across the years.

This brings me to today’s gospel passage. Actually it also brings me to the gospel passages for the past 3 Sundays as well. For some reason—possibly its length—our Revised Common Lectionary breaks an important passage in John’s Gospel into four parts. That, unfortunately, only makes it easier to take words and meaning out of context and to perhaps never see what is really going on. And when I say that it’s an important passage I mean it. Reflecting upon the more complete passage reveals much of what has brought us to this place, this time, this Eucharist. For me personally this passage is a foretaste of the Last Supper and thus has to do with our very identity as Christians. So where to begin…

Over the last three Sundays we have heard Jesus start to explain, to “unpack” the notion of discipleship in a very radical way. He’s already done this at least once before. In what we call the “Sermon on the Mount” or the “Beatitudes” we hear Jesus address not the crowds, but his disciples. “Seeing the people he climbed a hill; and when he had sat down his disciples came to him. He opened his mouth and spoke to them, saying…” Then he spells out what can best be described as a disciple’s job description. You are blessed when you intentionally do certain things right. You are cursed when you intentionally do certain things wrong. But as such it is also his flesh. They can only perform the works of God if they are willing to eat his flesh, drink his blood. For some followers this is too much. Nowadays some wonder if
something like cannibalism was on the minds of those hearing his words. But that only makes it easy to ignore this passage and move on to something else. And that is because we’re missing a very important connection that his message has within the Jewish culture he shared with his followers. To get to the bottom of this, we have to understand just a bit about honor, shame, and death in the ancient Jewish world.

Actually, much of what I’m about to talk about is still passed along in many traditions today in many parts of the world. But let me start with some observations about death among those ancient Jews. The person’s body was extremely important, even in death. It embodied, literally, the person’s identity, and therefore, along with that, the person’s honor or shame, righteousness or unrighteousness. Upon death, the body was to be washed and clothed and buried before sundown on the day of death. Apart from the obvious need for quick burial in warm climates this also meant that those burying the person were preserving that person’s entire identity as much as possible. In other words, everything about a person, their complete identity, was not to be dishonored or desecrated in death. By the same token, mutilating a body or denying a person a proper burial shamed and dishonored them in death, and they carried this into their afterlife. The beheading of John the Baptist was meant to do precisely that. It sent the message that, apart from simply killing John they meant to disgrace him forever. Crucifixion, as it was employed by the Romans in Jesus’ time, was perhaps even more effective. A death by mutilation, having been shamefully stripped of one’s clothes, and being left for the animals to further desecrate was, in Jewish eyes, possibly the worst thing that could happen to a person. After all, it robbed a person of all honor, all righteousness, and all identity; everything that a person was supposed to carry with them into the afterlife…or leave behind as a legacy for others.

But, very cleverly, this can also do something that was, at the time, uniquely unexpected…but which came to have meaning that has transcended the millennia between Jesus’ life and ours today. And it all comes back to bread and wine. You can almost hear Jesus formulating this idea as this longer passage from John’s Gospel unfolds. If the body, one’s very identity, does not perish but is somehow passed along for eternity, then it is possible for Jesus to pass his ministry on to future generations as long as they are willing to share in not only his teachings…but in his very identity—all that his ministry has become, all that it can and will become, all of his work and plans and dreams. To do this his followers must share in the one thing that symbolizes all of that: his flesh. By symbolically offering his own flesh in the form of bread that others can then eat he is inviting them to share in his very identity and to carry on all that he has begun. We eat the consecrated bread and become, in a real sense, part of Jesus, and Jesus becomes part of each one of us. That connection has mostly gotten lost through the ages, lost in the endless nuancing and editing that this idea has undergone in roughly two thousand years. Nevertheless, this is why the Body of Christ is such an important part of who we are and what we do, and how it must shape our lives if we eat it and share it with others.

Where the wine comes into all of this—the Blood of Christ—is just as clever, I think. All Jesus had to leave his followers were things that could be passed along symbolically. Words can be jumbled up or forgotten or argued about, but symbols are much more enduring. And the wine is the natural companion to the bread. They were both dietary staples for people living in that place and time back
then, and they have remained common and enduring things today. But sharing a symbol for blood? That also takes a bit of explanation in order to understand how important that was, and is.

In Jewish life, everything spiritual—and thus even cultural—revolved around honor and shame, sin and guilt, righteousness and unrighteousness. The priests of the Temple in Jerusalem were, in Jesus’ time, given the power over these things. And blood sacrifices were one of the most powerful means to take away guilt and sin and thus to restore righteousness, redemption, and well-being to those who lived under the Temple’s spiritual and cultural control. But what if the blood sacrifice was made once—and for all times and peoples—and could be shared anywhere, even outside of the Temple? What if you did not need to pay money to the Temple in order to be righteous before God? What if one could bless something common like wine to represent the blood of that sacrifice and then share it with others and all be made whole? What if those who also shared Jesus’ body—and thus his identity and ministry—also shared in the symbolic sacrifice and were redeemed forever? Today, for us, this completes our Eucharistic meal, making us one with Jesus and redeemed before God and all creation. For Jesus personally…this was about as seditious a thing as he could do in the eyes of the chief priests of the Temple, short of raising an army. It freed people from the tyranny of the Temple and called them to carry on his ministry of hope, love, and redemption.

If you’ve ever wondered why Jesus had to die, think about what I just said. Ponder it carefully. Remember these things as you personally prepare yourselves to receive the bread and wine and thus take on your own part of Jesus’ life and ministry. In the Eucharistic Prayer one person consecrates these gifts on behalf of us all, and our “Amen” at its end signifies that we take part in this act willingly. And so when we get to that part of the Eucharistic Prayer that goes, “World without end…” or otherwise bids us to say “Amen!” I hope to hear each of us say a strong and proud “Amen!” that indicates that we are here not just to be fed manna, but to continue what Jesus started and to leave this place and resume our lives, renewed, holy and redeemed, with new identity and purpose. Amen.