

COMMUNION: A REAL SYMBOLIC PRESENCE

(05/07/17)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Luke 24:28-35

*“Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”
(Luke 24:31)*

In a few weeks, on Pentecost Sunday, we will welcome those who wish to make the commitment to become a full member of our church. I like to meet with prospective new members before they join to talk about the kind of church we have, about our history and polity, our democratic church structure, and about the importance of pledging, of making a commitment of time, talent, and treasure to our church. Then the new member(s) meet with the Diaconate, the board that is authorized to accept new members to our fellowship. At this meeting we spend some time discussing our own religious backgrounds and how we came to this church.

Every time the Diaconate and I share our religious upbringings with a prospective member, as we did this past Tuesday, I find myself touched and humbled. When we say that our church is comprised of people from many different religious backgrounds, we are not kidding!

Over the nineteen years I have been here, we have had new members join our church who were raised Roman Catholic. Some grew up American Baptist, Southern Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Assemblies of God, and Jehovah Witnesses. Some were raised Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, Unitarian Universalist, Quaker, Greek Orthodox, and Lutheran. Several, including myself, are grounded in the Congregational tradition, the original denominational affiliation of this church.

Some did not grow up within any particular religious tradition. Their parents may not have raised them within any particular faith group. Yet they somehow found God, found Jesus, discovered this church, and made the commitment to deepen their relationship with God within the context of this community of faith. However you got here, no matter how labyrinthine the path that led you here, we are just glad that you are with us, that you are one of us!

When it comes to the Sacrament of Holy Communion, which we celebrate on the first Sunday of every month, because of our diverse religious backgrounds we may have been raised with different understandings of the meaning and significance of this sacrament.

Some of us were taught that only certain people are permitted to receive, e.g., only those who are members of our church. We don't observe that practice in this church. When, during the Words of Invitation I say, "Come to this table all you who desire," I mean exactly that. You don't have to be a member of this church, a Protestant, or even a Christian to receive the Eucharist. All you have to do is want to receive.

It seems to me that Jesus didn't place any theological restrictions on the people whom he fed. He didn't even demand that they believe in him, that they believe that he was the Son of God. He just fed them--with common everyday bread and with the bread of life.

In this church, we don't require that those who receive must be worthy. We don't require that you be of good moral standing, though, of course, we hope you are. In this church, we would find it distressing if you were to refuse to receive communion because you did not feel worthy. Communion has nothing to do with being worthy. Once we go down that road, keeping in mind what the apostle Paul said about how "we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," we would be preparing much smaller trays of bread and wine than we currently do.

The Words of Invitation invite all who "do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, who strive to live in love and charity with your neighbor, and who intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God and walking from henceforth in the way to which God calls you, [to] draw near with faith and take this holy sacrament for your comfort." The word comfort, in this context, does not mean to feel better, as in feeling comfortable. It means to strengthen. The prefix "com" means "with," and "fort" means strengthen, as in "to fortify." We invite you to this table "not because you are strong, but because you are weak." We invite you to strengthen your faith through worship and by joining around this table with our Lord.

It seems to me that Jesus didn't place any moral or spiritual conditions on those whom he fed. When he broke bread with his disciples in the Upper Room, he didn't place any restrictions on those who received. As far as we know, he shared the bread and the cup with Peter and also with Judas.

As we heard in our gospel lesson this morning, which you will note is the same passage of scripture we read last week, Jesus broke bread with his disciples on the road to Emmaus even though these disciples had denied and deserted him, even though they didn't understand that he was risen, even though they didn't believe that he was with them. This is why we don't have any

prerequisite conditions of beliefs, faith, or morality for you to receive communion in this church. As a child of God you are already worthy. All you have to do is want to gather around the table with our Lord in the company of this people.

Some religious traditions believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation. Through the Words of Consecration spoken by the priest, the bread actually becomes the body of Christ and the wine becomes his blood. The doctrine of consubstantiation holds that the body and blood of Christ exist alongside the common elements of bread and wine. In both of these traditions it is the Words of Consecration spoken by the priest that transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

I understand the theological doctrines that underlie these traditions. I just have a slightly different take on communion and what we are doing here this morning.

It seems to me that the doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation, in their focus on the elements of bread and wine, miss the point. They imply that Jesus is not present in this sacrament until the clergy person says the Words of Consecration.

In our tradition, we don't believe the clergy have special powers. We believe that the power to transform these common, everyday elements into something sacred lies in the faith of the believer. If we see through the eyes of faith, we can experience the actual presence of our Lord in and through this sacrament. However, this also is a possibility for us in the rest of our worship service, in prayer, and in every moment of our daily lives.

By the way, this is why I do not say the Words of Consecration. If you note, in our communion service we all say them together. We pray that these elements may become unto us the body and blood of Christ. If they become something special to us, it is not because of any special powers that I have or any words that I speak. It is our faith that has the power to transform these common elements into the experience of the presence of our risen Lord.

The traditional doctrines regarding the Sacrament of Holy Communion, in their focus on the miraculous transformation of the elements, seem to imply that Jesus, as the risen Christ, is somewhere else. At one moment he is not here, not with us. What we have on the plate is a plain ordinary piece of bread and what we have in the cup is plain ordinary wine or grape juice. Then, by virtue of the power vested in the ordained clergy person, they suddenly become the body and blood of Christ. Christ becomes present in them and, though they enter into us.

I am not a big fan of this way of thinking. Jesus was present with the disciples on the road to Emmaus before he broke bread with them. He did not suddenly become present to them through the bread and the wine. What happened when they broke bread together was not that Jesus suddenly became present to them; it is that they suddenly became conscious of his presence. Scripture tells us that “their eyes were opened and they recognized him.”

That’s just a common ordinary piece of bread and that’s just a cup of ordinary everyday grape juice on our communion table. It is not that Jesus as the risen Christ is not present to us until we partake. Jesus is already present to us, among us, within us! The glorious affirmation of the resurrection is that “He lives!” He lives within the world and he lives within our hearts. All we have to do is open our eyes to become conscious of his presence; to see him in our midst.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is not a memorial service. We are not just remembering something that Jesus did with his disciples, e.g., as the Jewish people during Passover remember how God led their people out of slavery in Egypt. This is a sacrament of presence. As we join together in this sacrament, we take part in a highly symbolic ceremony. These symbols and this ceremony hopefully open our eyes, enabling us to become more conscious of the ways that God through Jesus is already present with us and within us.

As you know, I am not a great fan of the idea that we are separated from God, that God is up in heaven and we are down here on earth. To be sure, in our Prayer of Invocation every Sunday we invoke God’s presence; we invite God to be present with us. But deep down we know that God is already here. God is present with us and within us. God is present even in the dark places of our lives. God is with us *especially* in the dark places of our lives. The problem is not God’s absence; it is that we are unaware of God’s presence.

Jesus Christ lives! He is here--right here, now! It is to our impoverishment that we are not more conscious of his presence. Our Lord is with us just as surely as he was with his disciples on the road to Emmaus. As we join in worship and in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we pray that, like the disciples, our eyes will be opened and we will realize that we are indeed in his presence. In this sense, communion is an example of a real symbolic presence.

Be present in this service of worship. Be present to yourself. Then open yourself to the presence of our Lord that he might fill you with the bread of life, enriching and strengthening

every part of your daily life. Let us be together as we celebrate and experience the sacrament of presence and the glorious affirmation of Easter that our Lord lives!

A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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