

COMMUNION—THE SACRAMENT OF PRESENCE

(08/01/2021)

Scripture Lessons: 2 Corinthians 13:5-13
Matthew 28:16-20

“Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?” (2 Cor. 13:5)

This morning, I would like to continue the exploration we began last week of Jesus’ encounter with the unnamed Samaritan woman by the side of Jacob’s well. The woman’s life was radically changed through this encounter. Even though there is some teaching in the exchange, e.g., around the issue of sacred space, it seems to me that the most important part of what happened was the transition from second-hand religion to first-hand religion through the woman’s encounter with Jesus. She was healed (or saved, for they mean the same thing) not by a teaching, but by a presence. And the same can happen to us!

According to the liturgical calendar, we are now in the season of what is called “ordinary time.” The liturgical year begins with Advent and the celebration of Jesus’ birth, the Incarnation. It moves through the events of Jesus’ life to his death and resurrection. Following the post-resurrection encounters, Jesus no longer appears on earth in human form. Through their experience at Pentecost, the disciples begin to experience him in a new way, as the Holy Spirit among and within them.

As we move through these liturgical seasons, we move through our celebration of the historical events of Jesus’ life to discover him in a new way, as a living presence in our lives. Like the disciples following the crucifixion and resurrection, we open our hearts to him that we might experience his presence. We seek to let him live in and through us as we pass through the “ordinary time” of our daily lives.

This morning, on communion Sunday, I would like us to think about the matter of presence and how the experience of presence can help us in our journey to become more fully the incarnations of God that God calls us to be.

Because many of us at Pilgrim Church and First Community Church come from different religious backgrounds, or sometimes no religious upbringing at all, I would like to say a few words about the sacrament we share this morning. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we are not just remembering and celebrating the historical event of Jesus’ final meal with his disciples, what is known as the Last Supper. If we open our eyes and ears, if we open our hearts and minds, we can experience his presence within us as individuals and as a community of faith this morning. The Sacrament of Holy Communion then becomes an experience of presence.

Some religious traditions believe that Christ is not present in the sacramental elements, the bread or wafer and wine or grape juice, until the priest says the Words of Consecration during the communion service. According to these religious traditions, it is the power vested in the priest by the institutional church that enables him/her to transform the bread into the body of Christ and the wine into his blood.

In our tradition, which is known as the free church tradition, we believe that the power to transform these common everyday elements into something sacred lies not in the magical power of the priest, but in the faith of the believer. If we have faith, if we see through the eyes of faith, we are able to experience the presence of our Lord in this sacrament. This is a possibility for us in worship, in prayer, *and in every moment of our ordinary daily life!* Our faith, the quality of our relationship with God, can infuse who we are and absolutely everything we do with the light of God's Spirit! If we see through the eyes of faith, we will see ourselves and others, we will see all of creation as an incarnation of God!

As you know, I am not a fan of the kind of dualistic thinking that would lead us to believe that we are separated from God: that God is somewhere up in heaven, and that we are down here on earth. To be sure, we might include a prayer of invocation at the beginning of our Sunday worship, invoking God's presence, inviting God to be present with us in our worship, but deep down we know that God is already here. The separation or distance addressed by the prayer of invocation is not God's absence; it is a confession that we are too often unaware of God's presence. God is here as a healing, comforting, and also a challenging presence within us! Jesus Christ is here--right here, now! Unfortunately, we are not always conscious of his presence.

The apostle Paul asks his parishioners in Corinth, "Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?" I think this is one of the most important, if not *the* most important of Paul's teachings! Jesus Christ is not separate from you, up in heaven somewhere; Jesus Christ is *in you!* He is present within you as the Holy Spirit. This means that the center of your life, your identity, is graced with the presence of the divine.

Think about nature. We believe that God created this world, this universe, that God's creative spirit has given rise to all that is. We can take this a step further (or deeper) in the belief that God not only made this creation, not only loves this creation; God *lives in and through* this creation. Francis of Assisi, who wrote the *Canticle to the Creatures*, believed that God *was present* in the sun, the moon, the stars, and all of nature. Because he experienced this so deeply, Francis could commune with the animals, with the wolf of Gubbio, which he tamed, and with the little birds. Francis spoke of "Brother Sun and Sister Moon." He saw all of nature as alive, as filled with the presence of God!

I'm sure you have had the experience of suddenly becoming aware of the presence of God in nature. This happened to me yesterday when a beautiful cardinal flew down and perched on a tree branch next to me. I found myself transfixed by the rich color, the intricate beauty of that bird! It happened to me this past week while walking our dog in the early morning following a rain. I saw a little drop of water on the tip of every needle of a white pine, and the rising sun was refracted in those little drops of water. I'm sure you have experienced a beautiful sunset, or the sunlight streaming down through the clouds, or the majestic colors of fall, and you experience a feeling of awe rise up within you that takes your breath away.

In these moments, what we call the inner world and what we call the outer world become one. Another way of saying this is that the imaginary boundary between the two worlds dissolves. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke speaks to this experience in a letter he wrote to the Russian-born psychoanalyst Lou Andreas-Salome, the woman whom he loved. In the section of the letter that Rilke called "The Experience," I believe he is speaking in the third person of himself when he says,

Later, he remembered certain moments in which the power of this moment was already contained, as in a seed. He thought of the hour in that other southern garden (Capri) when the call of a bird did not, so to speak, break off at the edge of his body, but was simultaneously outside and in his innermost being, uniting both into one uninterrupted space in which, mysteriously protected, only one single place of purest, deepest consciousness remained. On that occasion he had closed his eyes . . . and the Infinite passed into him from all sides, so intimately that he believed he could feel the stars which had in the meantime appeared, gently reposing within his breast.

This is *the experience!* The experience of which Francis and Rilke spoke, their pantheistic or panentheistic encounter with nature, finds expression in the Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn's book, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, when he writes,

Deep in the mountains, the great temple bell is struck. You hear it reverberating in the morning air, and all thoughts disappear from your mind. There is nothing that is you; there is nothing that is not you. There is only the sound of the bell, filling the whole universe.

Springtime comes. You see the flowers blossoming, the butterflies flitting about; you hear the birds singing, you breathe in the warm weather. And your mind is only springtime. It is nothing at all.

You visit Niagara and take a boat to the bottom of the Falls. The downpouring of the water is in front of you and around you and inside you, and suddenly you are shouting: YAAAAAAA!

In all these experiences, outside and inside have become one. This is Zen mind.

Pantheism teaches that God is present in nature, that God is present in creation. Pantheism teaches that God is not only present in nature; God lives in and through nature. However, we aren't always aware of God's presence. Too often we see or regard nature as if it were dead lifeless matter. This explains how we can so casually pollute the land, the water, the air, and our own bodies. When we don't see ourselves as a part of nature, we don't see that in polluting nature we are actually polluting, actually destroying ourselves.

If we could open our eyes to God's presence in nature *twice as much* as we do now, wouldn't the world be more beautiful? What if we could do it *a hundred times* more than we do now? Wouldn't our days be filled with joy? What if we had a *constant awareness* that we are not only witnesses to God's creation; we are a *part* of it? Such an experience would empower the divine presence to enrich our lives and then, through us, enrich the lives of others.

If we become aware of Jesus for one hour every week or every other week or however often we come to church, that's ok. It's not great, but it's better than nothing. But what if we become aware of Jesus once a day? What if we became aware of his presence ten times a day? What about a hundred times a day? What if, like Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, we talked to Jesus *all day long*? What if, as the apostle Paul suggests, we "pray without ceasing?" Wouldn't our days be filled with joy? Wouldn't they be filled with love?

Be present in this service of worship. Be present to yourself. Then, with the knowledge that Jesus Christ is in you, open yourself to the presence of our Lord in this fellowship, in this worship service, in this sacrament until it fills you with a beautiful tingling energy, with a beautiful warmth, with a surge of love that carries over into more and more of your ordinary everyday life. Open your heart to the presence of the Lord until it transforms you, for this is how the world can be healed and transformed.

The apostle Paul not only speaks to us; he gently admonishes us as Christians when he says, "Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?" Let us be present to each other and let us be present to our Lord as we celebrate, as we share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, as we experience this sacrament of presence.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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August 4, 2024*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.