

**THE EXPERIENCE OF PRESENCE
IN THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION**

(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)

For those of you who did not grow up Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, or Lutheran, I would remind you that 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 historical event of the Incarnation. It moves through the historical events of Jesus’ life to his death, and resurrection. Following the post-resurrection encounters, Jesus no longer appears on earth in human form. Through the 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 through us as we pass through the “ordinary time” of our daily lives.

This morning, on communion Sunday, as we prepare to receive this sacrament in the somewhat different form that we receive it because of the coronavirus pandemic precautions, 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 the incarnations of God that God calls us to be.

Because so many of us here this morning come from different religious backgrounds, different faith traditions (or sometimes no religious upbringing at all), I would like to say a few words about how we understand the sacrament in which 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, which took place approximately 2,000 years ago and which 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 with us as a community of faith. The Sacrament of Holy Communion then becomes a sacrament 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 during the priest's ordination 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. This is why, in our church, we say the Words of Consecration or the Prayer of Consecration together as a community of faith. Your role in the consecration, the transformation of the elements is just as important as mine. If we have faith, if we see through the eyes of faith, we will be able to experience the actual presence of our Lord in this sacrament. This is a possibility for us in worship, in prayer, *and in every moment of our daily life*. Our faith, the quality of our relationship with God, can infuse absolutely everything with the light of the 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 great 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 join in a prayer of invocation in 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 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! It is to our shame, our loss, and our impoverishment that we are not more conscious of this 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 all Paul's teachings! Do you realize that Jesus Christ is not separate from you, like 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* 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. Francis not only *believed* this; he *experienced* it! 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. (Remind me to tell you of an experience that my family and I had of this when we visited the lower basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy.)

Francis spoke of “Brother Sun and Sister Moon.” He saw all of nature as alive, as filled with the presence of God!

Haven’t you had the experience of suddenly becoming aware of the presence of God in nature? This happened to me yesterday when a beautiful cardinal that had been feeding at our bird feeder until we removed the feeder because of a disease that is infecting birds and that is spread at bird feeders (BTW, this is an interesting parallel to our coronavirus pandemic!), this beautiful bird 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 when, 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. The rising sun was refracted in those little drops of water. Have you ever had the experience of a beautiful sunset, or the sunlight streaming down through the clouds, or the majestic colors of fall touch you with awe and simply take your breath away?

In these moments, what we call the inner world and the outer world become one. Another way of saying this is that the imaginary boundary between the two worlds dissolve. 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 a little 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!* This peak experience, this religious experience, of which Francis and Rilke spoke, this panentheistic encounter with nature, finds expression in a different faith tradition, the Buddhist tradition, as described by the Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn, the 78th Patriarch in the Jogye Order of Korean Zen, and the founder of the Kwan Um School of Zen in Providence and Cumberland Rhode Island. Seung Sahn, in his book *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, 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 nature is God's creation. Panentheism teaches us that God is present in nature, that God is present in creation. 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. We don't see ourselves as a part of nature, which means that we see ourselves as basically dead and lifeless.

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*? Wouldn't our days be filled with joy? Wouldn't they be filled with love?

Be present now 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 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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