

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2009

Jesus and the Lord's Supper

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (*John 6:51*).

When he was Chaplain at Duke University, Will Willimon tells of a year-long series of conversations he had with a young woman student. While she was eager to learn about Christianity, she couldn't find a way to connect. Nothing quite made conceptual sense for her, in part, I suspect, because from the world's perspective everything is backwards. The world says death is the end of life, while our faith says that life can be born again to the fullness of life, here and now. The world says defeat your enemies and get justice, while Jesus says love your enemies, and the world asks, "Where's the justice in that?" But as we noted a couple of weeks ago, justice has nothing to do with grace which far exceeds justice. The world says work hard, apply yourself, climb the ladder; God says, "Be still, and you will find me." The two were just incompatible. The good Chaplain just couldn't seem to break through.

On one occasion, the young woman came to worship in Duke Chapel, at the end of which they celebrated communion. After the sacrament the young woman approached Dr. Willimon in tears. She did not say, "Now I understand," or "Now I get it." Aglow with an undeniable love, infused with a new, inexplicable spirit that bulldozed aside every former question, she beamed. "I *believe*. Now I know, I *know*!" By God's grace she had encountered the truth in the heart of mystery. A truth which the soul recognizes, yet which words and reason are incapable of capturing. Like falling in love. You know how that is.

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, which the sixteenth-century Anglican divine, Richard Hooker, building on St. Augustine, gave the sublime definition of. Hooker said a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace." Something tangible that bears the essence of mystery, the mystery of a relationship. A wedding ring is a good example.

What exactly does the sacrament of the Lord's supper stand for, and how does it convey its grace?

First, the Lord's Supper stands for a *broken* then *redeemed* humanity. Jesus chose to absorb the consequences of all that brokenness on the cross. And for his love and faithfulness, God gave Jesus his life back. Not a similar life unto another death, like Lazarus or the widow of Nain's son, but a life that greets the body's death like passing through an open door and leaving this body, this tent as the psalmist calls it, behind. Jesus' gift to us is a life that can never die. And it comes in exchange for a simple transaction, the great leveler of all earth's company past and present—*believing* in Jesus as the Christ, the embodiment of God. The cross is rightfully humanity's cross, for all our warring madness, our abandonment of God and neighbor, our casual ingratitude toward the fruits of the good earth and its sustaining gifts, and for the hurt we cause God, each other, and ourselves by injury or neglect. Jesus, who loves God absolutely, feels God's pain and God's desire for us to be reconciled to him and each other. So Jesus asks us to see, in his broken body and shed blood on the cross, the extent of God's love for us. By our believing we are made, from being mere mortals to being, as the psalmist puts it, "little lower than the angels."

Second, if the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is indeed more than a sign or symbol but an instrument, a change agent of God's grace for all who partake, how does it do that? Far more than any other gospel, John tells us that it is by embracing Jesus in faith. It is by believing that we are renewed. Ninety-six times in his Gospel, John uses the word "believe" (compare a total of 29 in the other three combined). It is not eating the bread and drinking the cup that magically changes us. It is in taking them *believing* that Jesus is one with and speaks for our reconciling God. You know how reconciliation feels—relief, joy, embrace, a

cleansing sense of new beginnings. Like the young woman at Duke, who could not figure this “religion thing” out or access just the right core of information, but warmed like cold hands to a fire to the radiance of the Spirit. She believed.

In John, Jesus does not save, as the later Medieval church would have us believe, by paying a debt for us in our place, called *substitutionary atonement*. Nor does he save us by *satisfying* in God some insistent need for divine justice to be done. Nor does Jesus become a *ransom* payment from God to the Devil, who had captured our souls from God. On the contrary, all who simply look upon the crucified Jesus *believing* are saved (restored and renewed). That is, we are brought home to God and to our best selves. Jesus chooses to sacrifice himself so that the new life in him might become the new life in us, by believing. His body, broken then renewed is, by believing, our renewal. His blood, shed unto death, is renewed, as we believe, in us, too.

If simply believing was universally satisfying, we could stop there. But clearly it doesn't satisfy the philosophical or theological mind, because major Christian traditions differ as to how Christ is an actual and effectual presence in the Lord's Supper. Not all Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper, Eucharist, Mass, Holy Supper—they are virtually equivalent terms. **Quakers** believe it's liturgical formality obscures the free flow of the Holy Spirit, which they hold as essential to their worship. Some traditions—**Baptist** and **Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**, and **Amish** take the Supper to be an “ordinance,” an expression of the community's faith but not a channel of saving grace. This also puts the emphasis on the human response, rather than God's saving grace. Nevertheless, the Disciples of Christ serve the Lord's Supper at every worship service.

Roman Catholics believe that once the elements of bread and wine are consecrated by using a specific liturgy (words and actions) they become actually the body and blood of Christ, called *transubstantiation*, even though the outward appearance of the bread and wine, their “accidents,” remain unchanged. **Eastern Orthodoxy** (Greek, Russian, Syrian, Armenian, etc) takes a very similar view, but emphasizes that appealing to the Holy Spirit is most crucial to transforming the elements. The Orthodox also use leavened bread, as we typically do, the yeast in the bread, as in wine, conveying the Spirit of God as the dramatic change agent.

Most **Protestants** (Presbyterian, Congregational, Lutheran, Episcopal, Methodist, Reformed churches, etc.) hold that Jesus real presence comes in and with the elements, but that they are not transformed into Jesus literal body and blood. This is called consubstantiation. Protestants' position is founded on the belief that Jesus' death and resurrection were a “once for all” event. So there is no need for a re-sacrifice at each celebration of the Supper. Which is why we also do not require re-baptism when someone moves to another denomination, as many Baptists require. Additionally, many Protestant denominations, including Presbyterians, do not have an “altar” as part of their liturgical furnishings, but a “communion table.” The former suggests a sacrifice, the latter, a gathering for a meal. Other distinctions among the churches are such as who may participate in the Lord's Supper, who may officiate, and who may serve the elements, whether to use wine or grape juice (the latter a resilient hold over from Prohibition sentiments), and the frequency of the celebration.

These distinctive traditions are all rooted in Jesus words, recorded throughout the New Testament. Of the bread and cup to be used in memory of him, Jesus said “This is my body, this is my blood.” These are a spiritual nourishment transcending the bread of earth. Through *believing* they open up a portal to an often undiscovered relationship with God in Christ, not magically, and often not immediately because space may need to be vacated into which to welcome the Spirit of God.

Now, listen again to John 6:35, 47-51.

⁴⁷ Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Amen.