

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

October 3, 2010

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 16:1-8

I Corinthians 11:23-26

The Chalice

(Fourth in a Six-Week Sermon Series on our Stained Glass Windows)

When we come to the Lord's Table, we need to take in four directions.

First, we look back.

And the place we look back to is Jesus' Last Supper and the cross. But don't forget that the meal Jesus and his disciples were sharing was the Passover meal, which looks back even farther.

Every year, just before Easter, the Chief Rabbi in Rome goes to the Vatican and presents an ancient, and by now quite tattered envelope to the Pope. The Pope inspects the envelope, shakes his head, and hands it back to the Chief Rabbi, who then departs.

This has been going on for nearly two thousand years. One year recently, it happened that there was a new Pope and a new Chief Rabbi. When the Chief Rabbi presented the ancient envelope to the Pope, as he had been instructed to do by his predecessor, the Pope looked it over and handed it back as he had been told to, in turn, by his predecessor . . . but then the Pope said, "This is an unusual ritual. I don't understand it. What is in this envelope?"

"Heck if I know," answered the Chief Rabbi. "I'm new here myself. But, hey, let's open it and find out."

"Good idea," said the Pope. So together, they slowly and carefully opened the envelope. And do you know what they found? The caterer's bill for the Last Supper!

What we know as the Lord's Last Supper was really the Jewish Passover meal. Moses instituted the Passover feast so that God's people would remember over the generations how God had delivered them from the slavery of Egypt. The meal consisted of lamb – a reminder that the blood of a lamb was placed on the door posts of their homes so the angel of death would pass over and not kill first born.

They eat unleavened bread because they had to leave Egypt so quickly that they didn't have time to wait for the bread to rise. They use bitter herbs reminder of bitter slavery. The entire meal is a celebration of remembrance.

And similarly for us, the Lord's Supper is a memory meal – looking back at what Jesus did. We are reminded of Jesus' sacrifice; how He gave himself unselfishly and completely, for the forgiveness of our sins. The marvelous thing about this is that He did this "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8) – which means Jesus died for us even though we don't deserve it.

The second direction we look is to look within.

And when we do, we realize that it's not so much what we humans do in the sacrament that matters; it is the actions that God does in the sacrament that really matter.

Because compared with the burning sun of what God does, our little candlelight actions are simply outshined.

And this is what God does: Forgives sins, Is present, and Unites us.

And it is GOD who does these things. We cannot do them for ourselves, so in the Lord's Supper, the Lord does them for us.

So we do the only thing a person does when a promise is made: we believe. Sure we can do things to focus our minds – like praying or concentrating – to decrease the chances that we just go through the motions. But the basic nature of the supper is that it is a promise. And the only way to take part in a promise is to believe it.

“I forgive you...I am with you...I am making you one.” Jesus says.
“I believe you,” we say.

In the verses just after where we stopped reading today Paul says, “Examine yourself before you eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” (1 Cor. 11:28)

Now you need to know that the church in Corinth was a mess. They were actually getting drunk and quarreling among themselves while going through the motions of celebrating the Lord's Supper. Paul needed to remind them of their priorities and their purpose.

And so, we look at ourselves: what do we see? What are we doing with our lives? How are we living? Are we striving for holiness? Do we put Jesus first in our lives – are we totally committed to Him?

There is a beautiful prayer that Episcopalians have in their communion service, which lifts up what Christ did for us (our looking back) and our approach to the Lord's Supper in light of it (our looking within). It's called the Prayer of Humble Access:

We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord, whose nature is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

In the Lord's Supper we come as close to Jesus as we can on Earth – more than that we receive him into our bodies. And in doing this we become the Body of Christ, which brings us to the third direction we're looking.

Thirdly, we look around.

In the verses just before our reading for today Paul says, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” (1 Cor. 10:17)

As we look at our brothers and sisters around us, those who are physically with us– we give thanks to God for our Christian family. “No man is an island,” is true – we need one another.

The Lord’s Supper is also called Holy Communion. And it is that – a Holy Communion / gathering / exchange of believers. It says something about our relationships with each other that we will pass among us the body and blood of our Lord, serving each other a meal of forgiveness and reconciliation.

As I said about the church in Corinth – their fellowship was in conflict and so Paul wrote what he wrote to them. And it seems that churches have been in conflict ever since. And disagreements over the Lord’s Supper have divided churches through the centuries.

Here’s what one pastor said in a sermon to his congregation; again admonishing them to not ignore the communal nature of the Lord’s Supper:

You are willing to take all of God’s goods in the sacrament, but you are not willing to pour them out again in love. Nobody extends a helping hand to another, nobody seriously considers the other person, but everyone looks out for himself and his own gain, insists on his own way, and lets everything else go hang. (Martin Luther, Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, 7th sermon, 1522)

A couple weeks ago I said, that Christianity is a team sport, with no superstars. Just last night our 6-yr. old asked us who was in charge of the church. And we explained that all the meetings I go to are with different groups of people who are in charge of the church. (And then she suggested that we should have people in charge of the money; and we assured her that we had very capable people who did that.)

The point is that we’re all in this together and on Communion Sunday’s we’re aware of this even more. And especially today on Worldwide Communion Sunday when the children will join us up front and we are intentionally mindful of Christians ‘round the globe sharing in the Body of Christ today as well.

And lastly in the Lord’s Supper, we look ahead - “until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26)
To the future.

We are looking forward to the time when He will come again and we will have Communion with our Lord in His kingdom. (Matthew 26:29; 1 Corinthians 11:26). And I would hope that we are looking forward to His coming with joy rather than with fear.

Our faith is a forward-looking faith. Jesus has promised to return and while we don’t put that date on the calendar (because we don’t know it) we shouldn’t forget that God has not forgotten about us and does not leave his creation and his people to fend for themselves.

We’re all headed in the same direction, on the same trajectory, because we’re following Jesus and he takes us straight into the heart of God.

And it’s this forward looking nature of our faith that gives meaning to our looking back, our looking within, and our looking around – gives purpose and hope.

This meal and the closeness we have with Jesus in it, is a foretaste of the feast to come, when we will see Jesus face to face. Think of the Lord’s Supper as a Holy Appetizer to what is to come.

The famous Dutch artist Rembrandt painted an interesting picture of the crucifixion of Jesus. It is a shows the suffering of Jesus, the indifference of the soldiers, the sorrow of the women at the cross. But the most unusual aspect of the picture is that if you look closely you will see that Rembrandt painted himself back in the shadows.

This is what the Lord Supper does for us; it helps us see ourselves at the foot of the cross, to remember the suffering of Jesus on our behalf. We can come to this table in reverence, thanksgiving, humility, awe.

As we share in the broken body of Christ today,
remember Jesus, and all he has done for us,
ponder what this means for you
consider what this personal renewal in you can do for others
all the while looking forward in hope.

Amen.