

Body and Blood

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
October 7, 2012 World Communion Sunday

I Corinthians 11: 23-26

Memories – memories in stories, memories in words. When you think about it, so much of family and relationships and life is wrapped up in memories...in the stories we tell. I can still remember how fast my grandmother walked everywhere she went and how, even when she was 80, she would talk about all those “old” people. Or my aunt, every Thanksgiving, fretting that her turkey was just too dry. We still laugh about it today. I remember as a young boy, sitting on the couch waiting for my father to come home. After the Korean War, he was working all day and then going to school at night to finish his Bachelor’s Degree at Arizona State. I can still remember the flash of the headlights as he pulled into the driveway and I knew he was home at last. These are memories given expression in stories and words so that we too might share in the remembrance.

But, in the words of United Church of Christ pastor, Martin Copenhaver, “If memories are deep, and if they have a hold on us in a powerful and personal way, they will soon be beyond the power of words to express...If our memories are powerful, they simply outgrow words, and we long for something more than a story, something that looks and feels more like life itself. We want in some way to make the journey again. We want to *do* something. *Do* this in remembrance.”

He then tells a story, a story that involves, wouldn’t you know, fishing. Says Copenhaver, “For me, a person who usually strives to use my hours productively, fishing is a most improbable way to spend an afternoon.(he is on the edge of blasphemy here!) But fishing means something special to me because I used to fish with my father. Now everything about it reminds me of him: the sound of the tackle box when I carry it, the smell of the box when I open it, the distant splash of a lure after a long cast, the intent fisherman’s stare at the surface of the water. So one day, soon after my father’s death, I took an afternoon off and went fishing. I could have spent the afternoon talking about my father, telling stories, reading old letters. But in some mysterious way, this was something more. Words aren’t always enough. *Do this* in remembrance. *Do this* because you remember. *Do this* in order to remember.”

Do you suppose that Jesus knew how important it would be for the disciples to have something more than words or stories? He knew he needed to give them something to *do* in remembrance. And what he chose was a meal, a simple meal, something they had shared together many times, giving his followers ample opportunity to remember.

Certainly this is one aspect of the meal we share today...a meal that helps us remember, something beyond words, deeper than words. And many people throughout Christian history have seen this as the power of this sacrament – a meal given its power by the power of memory. Remember what Christ said; remember what Christ did; remember what he meant to you; remember what he means to you. *Do this* in remembrance.

When I put out my request for possible sermon topics, the topic of communion was raised. Donna Tappan, for example, didn’t really have a problem with the memorial and memory aspect of communion, which I just discussed, but rather with the elements themselves – bread and wine (juice). “Body and blood of Christ?” she asked, “It sounds just a bit pagan, doesn’t it?” She has a point. There were those in the first century who actually accused Christians of cannibalism – drinking blood and eating flesh. I am reminded of the story, some of you have heard this before, of a young girl coming forward for her very first communion. The silver cup was held down where she could reach it. She peered inside, sniffing the sweet, heavy wine. (obviously, Episcopalian – not UCC) She raised her hands to take the chalice – a moving moment for the entire congregation as the priest said, “The blood of Christ.” “Yuck!” she said, turning away. “I don’t want any!” Would any of us want it, if it were the real thing?

There is a scene near the end of Hemingway’s, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, that I believe gets us very close to the meaning of the bread and wine – body and blood of Christ. The hero, Robert Jordan, has been fatally wounded by the Spanish Fascists. The girl he loves, Maria, wants to stay behind and die with him. But he tells her that she must go on and live. The words he uses as he tells her why she must go on suggest much, I believe, about what Christ is saying to us in this sacrament:

Now you will go for both of us. You must do your duty now...Now you are going well and fast and far and we both go in you...Now you are doing what you should. Now you go for us both. The me in you. Truly. We both go in you now. This I have promised you...

She started to look around. "Don't look around," Robert Jordan said. "Go." And Pablo hit the horse with a hobbling strap and it looked as though Maria tried to slip from the saddle. But Pilar and Pablo were riding close against her and Pilar was holding her and the three horses were going up the draw.

"Roberto," Maria turned and shouted. "Let me stay! Let me stay!"

"I am with you," Robert Jordan shouted. "I am with you now. We are both there. Go!" Then they were out of sight around the corner of the draw and he was soaking wet with sweat and looking at nothing.

"This is my body which is broken for you," he said, as he broke the bread. Then he lifted the cup and spoke of the blood he would shed for them. Then he invited them – and us – to eat and drink of this food. The death cannot be overlooked. The words powerfully remind us that Jesus' passion for us, for justice, for a new way, for the least of these, led him to a violent death, executed by the powers that rule the world, and who will always resist the in-breaking of a new heaven and new earth.

But there is more here than simply a reflection on Jesus' death, more even than the power of memory. "The me in you... *this* I have promised you."

Says Frederick Buechner, "The mystery of symbols is that a symbol contains some of the power of the thing that it symbolizes. As for our symbols of the Last Supper, Protestants argue with Roman Catholics, and they both argue among themselves, as to precisely how the power of Christ is present in the symbols of bread and wine. But I think that it is not too great an oversimplification to say that they all agree that one way or another, extraordinary power is there. Extraordinary because they contain a power that does not simply make the heart beat faster, say, but power that can transform a human life into a new kind of life altogether – a life like His, with some of his power in it."

Now, again, there is no denying that the body and blood language intrinsically associates the bread and the cup with Jesus' death. And as I said, yes, these words remind us that Jesus' passion for us, for justice, for a new world – I like this idea so much more than the old concept of him dying for our sins - this passion led him to his death.

But...what is really at the heart of this sacrament is not death, but the life being offered here. The bread and the cup are all about becoming, in Paul's words, one in Christ, joining our lives to his life, our passion to his passion. The me in you. There is life being offered here, life that runs out of that cup like a spring of living water. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "This is as close as God can get: blood kin, indissoluble union, friend bound to friend for forever. When we take the bread and eat, and lift the cup to our lips and drink, we accept the gift, renewing the covenant and reminding ourselves that we do not live for ourselves alone. We are possessors of a double life, having taken our friend's life and nature into ourselves, where they ride our bloodstreams straight to our hearts..."

How exactly is Christ present in this meal? Well, after all the words I have spoken this morning, I guess I must finally say that I suspect we can never fully know. Such love is always a mystery. But his presence is no less real for our inability fully to explain it...this mystery and power of Jesus, made real and available to us. For all of his theological sophistication and learning, finally even one such as John Calvin, when speaking of this supper and Christ's presence in this supper, could only say, "I would rather experience it than understand it."

So let us simply accept the gifts offered by this sacrament to us: life, not death, his life becoming our life, as he satisfies our hunger and quenches our thirst, all the while inviting us to join him in his passion for all God's children and for a different kind of world.