

Epiphany 2, 1/15/2017

Isiah 49:1-7, Psalm 40:1-12, I Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-42

Communion

(Catholics of the Cosmos, Part 3)

My job this morning is to say something about the Episcopalian way of doing Communion. My goal is to help all of us enrich our Communion experience. So with this in mind I'd like to read a portion of one our Eucharistic Prayers to kind of get us in the mood:

*We praise you and bless you, holy and gracious God, source of life abundant.*

*From before time you made ready the creation.*

*Your Spirit moved over the deep and brought all things into being:*

*Sun, moon, and stars; earth winds, and waters; and every living thing.*

*You made us in your image and taught us to walk in your ways.*

*But we rebelled against you, and wandered far away; and yet*

*As a mother cares for her children, you would not forget us.*

*Time and again you called us to live in the fullness of your love.*

What an odd piece of work is the human race. We are bundle of contradictions: we are creators, we are destroyers; we are lovers, we are haters: we are brave, we are cowardly. One of our most interesting contradictions is that we are a tiny little speck of dust on the outer edge of a nearly infinite universe, yet we continue to think that everything is all about us.

But it is our oddness that makes us interesting. As materially insignificant as we are, we are the only known species that both knows it exists within an all-encompassing universe AND INSISTS that this universe have some kind of adequate and coherent meaning. This insistence upon meaning is the hub around which my remarks this morning will revolve, and I will try to relate this to the Episcopal way of doing communion, and I will try to do it all in about twelve minutes (so pray for me).

Neither an individual human being nor the human race can long survive without meaning any more than he or she can survive without air. Four hundred years ago, our very own Will Shakespeare gave an eloquent description of a meaningless life:

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,*

*Creeps in this petty pace from day to day*

*To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.*

This is, of course, Macbeth's final soliloquy, and if you know the story, you know he did not long survive the meaningless life he described.

There are many ways that the human soul tries to wrestle the universe into a coherent meaning; I'll just mention a three. One is through stubborn, material, facts. Let's call it "science" for simplicity's sake. Science is a wonderful thing, facts are great, we should all be scientists and fearless seekers of fact. But if we had a long enough piece of paper and a pen with enough ink and could list every fact contained in the universe, the sum total of all the facts in the universe cannot tell us why there is a universe in the first place nor for what purpose it exists. But we are tempted, and sometimes "blinded" by science and expect it to do what it cannot do, which is to give meaning to human existence.

Another common quest for meaning is through the acquisition of power. Power in a culture comes in three basic flavors; military, economic, and political. If we are sometimes blinded by science, we are more often seduced by power. We have a devil of a time breaking our addiction to the belief that if we are strong enough, or rich enough, or can get to the political driver's seat and stay there long enough, life will be good. But acquiring power leads to inevitable conflicts with all the others who also lust for power, and the struggle for power inevitably escalates, which leads inevitably to war. For many centuries, and in many cultures war did seem to give meaning to life. I practice an art which has its roots in a culture that made war into an art form, and the most honored citizen in that culture was the warrior. But our species has become so proficient at killing each other that we are beginning to realize that there is a straight and unbroken line between the seductions of power and the final annihilation of the human species. And so our quest for meaning through power will then have failed, and there will be one left to mourn our passing.

So, on that happy note we turn to religion. In most of human history religion has done the heavy lifting in providing the meaning for life, and it does this, through the telling of stories. Religion says the universe is encased within a great drama. When the universe has an over-arching story we call it a Cosmos. A Cosmos is a universe that has an ultimate and compelling meaning.

But religion also has a very mixed record in providing the necessary and life-giving purpose to humanity. Far too often religion has been seduced by power, whether political, financial, or military, or some combination. When religion is seduced by power it becomes its opposite. It becomes demonic. Religion seduced by power becomes a crusade, an inquisition, or a jihad. Christopher Hitchens, one of the front line commandos of modern, militant atheism, said, “religion ruins everything.” He was speaking, of course, of the only religion he understood, the demonic religion of crusades and jihads. But if we were to ask any of the soldiers of the modern atheism what is the meaning of the universe, they will say that it has no meaning. Their universe looks very much like Macbeth’s, just a massive stew of energy and matter, full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing. No rhyme, no reason, no story. Well, I’m sorry Mr. Hitchens and friends, but that’s just not going to cut it. The human soul hungers for meaning as much as the body hungers for food. A meaningless universe is un-inhabitable.

If a friend or a stranger were to come up one day and ask if you were a Christian, I’m guessing most of us in this room would say, “yes”. But if that friend or stranger were to press it a bit further and ask you what it means to be a Christian it would require a more thoughtful answer. You don’t want to just give her some rehashed formula or hand her a booklet. She asks for, and deserves the best answer you can give, because the sub-text of her question is, “What is the meaning of your life”?

You might, from a Christian perspective, say, “The meaning of my existence is love. From the smallest particle to the farthest galaxy, from my precious child, to your precious child, to all the hungry, homeless children. Everything that was, is, or ever will be is grounded in love (including you me!). And even when we rebel against love, (and we all rebel against love from time to time) even when we suffer for no apparent reason, or are lonely, or when a world seduced by power seems to have gone completely mad, we are still not far from love. Because the Christian believes that God not only created all things in love, but love has come to us in the flesh, to rejoice with us, and to be our joy, suffer with us and to suffer for us, and to take upon himself the tragic results of our rebellion against love, and so to conquer death in order to give us life, and to be our abundant life.” If it didn’t sound a little pretentious, you might be tempted to paraphrase Einstein and say to your friend, “For the Christian the meaning of everything is that  $\text{God} = \text{Love} \times \text{the speed of light, squared}.$ ” That’s mouth-full, but it is wonderfully true. It is our story, and it is the greatest story ever. Instead of insignificance and sound and fury, we have love upon love, grace upon grace.

But it's not enough to hear the story, or to be moved, comforted or even excited by the story. What being a Christian means is that we become part of the story, and the story becomes a part of us.

This is at the heart of what it means to take communion. When we take the bread and the wine, we declare we are no longer on the sidelines, we are in the game, we are no longer in the audience, but up on the stage playing a part in the drama of the creation and the redemption of the universe. The Word of God has become flesh, and in the bread and the wine, I take the Word of God into my flesh. The story becomes an indivisible part of my being.

Jesus instituted the sacrament of communion on the night of his betrayal, but there is a sense in which the New Testament and much of the entire Bible is a communion story, a call to become a part of the Creation, Redemption, and of the final Fulfillment of all things in Christ.

In our Gospel reading from the first Chapter of John, we have, in a sense, the story of the first communion service in the New Testament. Two of John the Baptist's followers started following Jesus around, and he turned to them and said "What do you want?" And they asked him where he was staying. Then Jesus answers with the sweetest of invitations; "Come, and you will see." So the two followers of John spent the day with Jesus, and I assume they must have shared a meal at some point. This first communion was an invitation to discipleship. From that first communion became instant missionaries, they went to friends and relatives saying that they had found the Messiah and then repeated the invitation, "Come and see".

So this is the great invitation to commune with God through Christ. You have heard the story, so now, "Come and see", to which may be added, "Come and touch", "Come and taste", "Come and know the width and the breadth, the depth and the height, come and know the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge."

In the Episcopal Church, unlike some communities, we believe in open communion, which means everyone is welcome at God's table and we don't check your credentials at the gate. I learned recently that the Dali Llama actually took communion from Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu, but, as a rule we ask that you be a baptized believer in the greatest story ever told. So, if you are baptized, please come and touch and taste. If you don't feel you are ready for the bread and the wine, please come and just cross your arms and receive the blessing of love upon love, grace upon grace.

I will close now with a part of the prayer of humble access:

*We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies... Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear son, Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us, Amen.*

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