

The Dangerous Memory of Jesus

Text: I Corinthians 11:23-26

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Did you recognize the Eucharist liturgy this morning? Well, it may have sounded familiar, but you have not heard such a liturgical expression before because I wrote it for this service. The content is now new; it is what we believe about Jesus in the context of his life and death. However, traditional liturgical forms do not reflect so explicitly what it is we intend to remember here when we come to the Lord's Table. Forms used here for a long time have not expressed the traditional substitutionary atonement idea. Nonetheless, they have been less than clear about the reason we continue this sacramental practice, which is in order to retrieve the dangerous memory of Jesus.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the 11th chapter, the lesson that is listed, he quotes the tradition that says to break the bread in remembrance of Jesus and to take the cup in remembrance of Jesus, and we have come for two thousand years as a community in one shape or another around the table with bread and the cup in an act of remembering or retrieving. The liturgy is a conservative restraint on the Church. The liturgy is the most conservative dimension of the Church. One ought not to fuss and tinker with the liturgy like I did. It is not a wise practice. The liturgy keeps us focused on the center. Preachers may be heretics and sermons may be wildly out of line, but as long as the liturgy is intact, not a great deal of harm is done. And there is something to be said for that. There is a positive value in it.

John A. T. Robinson, who was the wildly heretical bishop of the Church of England, wrote his book in 1961, *Honest to God*, was nonetheless imbued with the Anglican Prayer Book, and in the Anglican Communion you can change anything, but don't mess with the Prayer Book. John A. T. Robinson even defended that, saying that it connects us as a present community with that community that has spanned two thousand years. If you happen to come from the Episcopal Anglican communion or the Roman Catholic communion or high Lutheran communion, then liturgy has been the heart and center, it has been very important, and you know that that is where the weight is laid. I, having not come from those traditions, although I am sorry that I did not, because I have had to learn it all on my own later on, even to develop the Anglican sniff, you know? But,

if you don't come from that tradition, as I don't, then you might be tempted sometimes to call those high liturgical traditions liturgical fundamentalists, if you want to taunt a bit.

But, nonetheless, liturgy is important and one ought not to play with it. I rather boldly this morning wrote it the way I hoped it would incite us to remember Jesus. What I have written here you have heard me say over and over again. It is not that the content of it is new; it is just that you never had it in this context. We have not had atonement theology in the liturgy for a long time around here. But, we have used forms that were not as clear about what we were calling people to remember as the liturgy did this morning. I did that on purpose, even though I value the liturgical tradition.

Liturgy needs continually to be updated, although there are those who can get picky about it. Every once in a while I am challenged by some liturgical use here, and I am accused of having liturgy which is dissonant with the sermons I preach. In fact, there are those who say that I have only gotten away with what I have gotten away with theologically because the liturgy stayed intact and there was a sense of continuity and a feel that is sort of the same. So, I perhaps signed my death warrant this morning in making the liturgical statement a statement of what has been preached here for a long time - the dangerous memory of Jesus.

As I said, people can get picky about it. Language shapes. Language is terribly important, and we have come to see that we have had to change some forms. For example, the "Our Father," which for some has been an almost irredeemable barrier to communion with God, to some women, for example. Those are battles that are fought in the Church, liturgical battles, language battles, language with hymns. We have gone through all of that. And if one can approach it with some sanity and maturity, then one can go through that and recognize that all liturgy, hymns and prayers are really poetry, that they ought not to be taken literally, and if they are not taken literally, if they are reinterpreted as we receive them as symbolic and as poetic, then we can receive them back with a second naiveté.

Nonetheless, language is important and so this morning I attempted to say liturgically what I hope you will receive sacramentally and hear in proclamation, that the dangerous memory of Jesus will have been imbibed in the sacrament and proclaimed in word, and that we will be confronted with that Jesus, not because it was Jesus, but because something came to expression and embodiment in Jesus, and it is Jesus who is that founding vision for the Christian tradition. So, if we would continue in that tradition, then we would be called again and again to retrieve that dangerous memory of Jesus. As I was thinking about that, I thought about those challenges that I have received, and I thought it is perhaps time to explain exactly what I hope you experience when you come to the table. What is the memory of Jesus?

I know the shaping power of liturgy because as a child I came to the Lord's Supper only four times a year and yet, year after year after year after year those words and phrases and paragraphs were imprinted upon the depths of my being. I still remember the old orthodox, conservative atonement theology of the Lord's Supper. Being a part of the Reformation tradition, it was a tradition that defined itself over against the Roman Catholic tradition, and the sacrament to be a holistic experience was turned into a didactic experience where we explained with careful definition our theology." He was forsaken of God that we need never be forsaken. Or, in preparation for the table, after being charged to come with a clean conscious, the paragraph, "These things are not said, dearly beloved, in order to distress the contrite heart of God's people lest no one could come to this table but those who were without sin..." You see, I can still reel it off. That does deeply imprint, and so I know how important it is that we work together at an understanding of how we come to this table, not that everyone has to come to this table with the same understanding, and not that anyone has to change any understanding that is meaningful and communicates the transcendent. I don't mind that a bit. But, let us try, at least, to be consistent in our liturgical practice and the proclamation of the theological vision that we have shared together.

As I was working on this, I was reading Volume II of Gary Dorrien's *American Liberal Tradition*. It is so fascinating to me; I was not reading it for this purpose at all, but serendipitously, there it came. Cited on page 148f, Charles Clayton Morrison, long time editor of *The Christian Century*, is the one who named that journal the Christian Century at the turn of the 20th century because there was such an optimism about the future of the Christian tradition. The social gospel had come into being a decade or so before that. The social gospel had an understanding of Jesus as a proclaimer of the Kingdom of God, and out of the liberal tradition came this social gospel tradition that wanted to Christianize America. It was full of all kinds of good intentions. It was highly optimistic; it was also naive, but it had a beautiful vision and a passion to Christianize this society.

What they understood themselves as doing was to leapfrog over all of the centuries and all of the high Christological doctrine and all of the Church's structure and liturgical practice and get back to Jesus. They saw Jesus in his historical context, because this was the time when the historical Jesus studies were beginning to become commonly known. What they saw in Jesus was one who proclaimed the Kingdom of God, that is, the world the way it would be if God ruled. They made all kinds of radical proposals about the transformation of society, and there was a movement in that liberal tradition from God "out there," a supernatural kind of theism, a God who dipped down to save and redeem for some future state. Rather, they understood Jesus to be concerned about the world here and now and its transformation. So, there was a great passion and there was a great optimism, and the social gospel was heralded by some great spirits, and it never did very well in the Church. Charles Clayton Morrison, in the 30s, suggested that the reason that it never did very well in the Church was that the Church is an institution and the gospel of the Kingdom of Jesus was the

gospel of a movement of a protest movement, of a reformer in a back corner of the Roman empire challenging the imperial power of the state, and the dominating power of the Church. Charles Clayton Morrison, as he could see that there was so much fire and enthusiasm for this in the hearts of the clergy, was trying to figure out why it didn't take in the Church, and he came to see that it started out as a movement. The gospel of Jesus is a movement. It is a radical social movement. It has all kinds of implications.

If I had read the other lesson I had intended to read this morning, it would have been from Acts 4 where the disciples are proclaiming Jesus and his resurrection after the event of Easter, the Easter experience, and the authorities hauled them in and arrested them, and they don't know what to do with them and so they take them out and charge them severely, "Don't speak in that name." Peter and John come back to the community and the community says, "Praise God, thank God," and they start quoting scripture, a song of David in the fourth chapter of Acts, the 26th verse, "Why did the nations rage, and why did the kings and rulers of the earth storm against you and against your kingdom," and so on. And then they remembered Jesus who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and at the end of the fourth chapter is that paragraph about that early commune. It was a purely communist society; they shared their goods, sold their goods, shared with one another and no one had any need. There was a common purse that ends with the story of Barnabas who had a field and sowed it and brought the receipts to the disciples' feet. Now, that is the way it started, and Morrison says, "You know what? In time the early Church fathers began to institutionalize this whole thing and Emperor Constantine in the 4th century established the Church, obviously it couldn't live that way anymore." The way it was now structured as an agent of an empire, as a world movement, it just couldn't handle the gospel of the kingdom according to Jesus of Nazareth.

Morrison told the story that in 1933 there were some 600 ministers in a denominational conference in Ohio. He obviously was there. He said their hearts were burning, they were fervent, they were talking about the end of this whole war business, they were talking about economic reform, they were talking about government ownership, they were edging perhaps on the edge of a modified socialism. These clergy people all gathered together, probably in their collars and their tails hugging one another and saying, "Isn't it great? Yes, go Jesus!" But, he said, then they got back to their pulpits and they offered a far tamer fare. And then he says something rather tragic. He said there were those who came back to their pulpits and didn't tell their people at all about the burning passion of their heart, and they got alienated from their work. There were a few frivolous souls like myself who dared to tell their people what they were thinking and they lost their positions. And there were a few cases where it got through to the people, but the only place to tell about it was in the sermon and the sermon is the worst possible place to tell about it, because in shaping a community, it is shaped in prayer and in song and in meditation and in being together, not in the cognitive experience of hearing the proclamation. And so Charles Clayton Morrison

diagnosed the reason why the religion of Jesus was so inhospitably received in the organized church. And we can understand why the Church has lived all through the centuries much more easily with that conservative and orthodox understanding of atonement theology whereby whatever happened to Jesus was for the salvation of the world, but a salvation that was to be realized in the sweet by and by.

So, I struggle with all of that. I have, of late, been discouraged, to be honest with you, even on the edge of being depressed, because the more I sense what Jesus was about in his historical context as we know today through cross-cultural studies, etc., the more I see the impossibility of the Church being Christian. You can't take a first century protest movement, a commune, and translate that one-on-one into an established institution which is not only an established institution in the back corner of the world, but an established institution of the most powerful nation in the world, today's imperial power. You cannot really allow the dangerous memory of Jesus to shape your vision and your values without finding some dissonance between our society today and that which Jesus seemed to embody. And so, I make a little effort this morning to express that dangerous memory so that when we come to this table this morning, we will have done it with awareness.

What did you remember at the table this morning?

I don't have answers. Honestly, I don't have answers. I am troubled by the fact that I see so little wrestling with the question, in all honesty, I'd rather not remember. I'd rather forget. But, then I'd have to abandon this table and to abandon this table and the memory that it strikes in me would be to deny that which I believe is the highest and the best and the noblest impulse of my being. Charles Clayton Morrison said that the problem was that the social gospel was a ministers' gospel never owned by the laity. And he said the lay people never really understood the passion and burden in the hearts of their pastors. He said the people got only enough of a hint of it to be irritated by it, and then, and I'm quoting now, he's preaching politics again or economics or internationalism. I wish he'd just preach the religion of Jesus.

References:

Gary Dorrien. *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950, Vol. II*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.