

Eucharist: Memory, Presence, Hope

Pentecost V

Text: Deuteronomy 16:1; I Corinthians 11:24; Mark 14:22, 24

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Observe ..by keeping the Passover... The Lord your God brought you out.." Deuteronomy 16:1

"Do this in remembrance of me." I Corinthians 11:24

"Take, this is my body... This is my blood of the covenant" Mark 14:22,24

In the first service there was a young pastor who is between assignments. He is on his way to a new assignment and he stopped here for Sunday morning worship. He said to me, "I've heard a lot about this place and I wanted to stop before I left." He said, "It's strange the things you hear. I heard that you preached in a rocking chair." (Laughter) "Well," I said, "it sort of has that effect on the congregation, but I always use this stool." (Laughter)

We had a reading from the Old Hebrew Scriptures regarding the institution of the Passover, at least an instruction to keep the Passover, one of the great feasts of Israel to celebrate their deliverance from Egypt in the Exodus. We read the account of the apostle Paul, probably the earliest Christian account of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, or Communion, or the Eucharist Feast, and we read the institution itself in Mark's gospel. If I were to read a contemporary lesson I would read from one of our own who wrote to me recently,

"As I listen to the minister retell the Last Supper story and present the bread and the cup heavenward, I become drawn into a place of wonder and awe, a holy place where I may begin to experience a little bit of God in my own life. My head stops being in charge, and for those moments I become a child again, a child who has been allowed a glimpse of the heavenly. I feel infused with the love and, for just a fleeting moment, the understanding of God. It is the holiest of moments for me. My fellow participants become at the deepest level my brothers and sisters in Christ in an almost tangible way. I have yet to participate in a Eucharist celebration at Christ Community with dry eyes. For a brief time on those Sundays I am able to let go of my head, of my intellectual faith and questions and doubts, and experience faith on a deeper level. It is a level

that is more enriching and rejuvenating, a nourishing faith that can sustain me throughout the week."

Would that that would happen to each of us every time the table is set. In this congregation the table is set every Lord's Day at the early service, and from time to time at the second service as today. It is an experience of the presence of God that comes in a unique fashion through the elements of bread and wine.

We look at the sacraments now because it is the season of Pentecost. I want to connect participation in Eucharist with the Spirit of God because without that, participation in itself can become empty ritual. But bathed in prayer and received in faith, it becomes a means of grace. It becomes a moment of encounter. It becomes experience.

Last week at the baptismal font, there was prayer for God to breathe through the water. Today, if you followed the liturgy, there was the invocation of the Holy Spirit to make this bread and this wine the body and blood for us; to enliven the material with the spiritual—God's Spirit or God's Wind or God's Breath—Wind, Spirit, Breath—the Hebrew word *RUACH*, which means wind or spirit or breath, which is tangible, which is energy, which is energizing. Jesus said, the wind blows and you don't see it, but you see the tree and the leaves waving because there is an energy there. So in our Christian experience, in any religious experience that is genuine experience of God, it is the breathing of God. It is the present moment, the reality of the living God in our experience.

The one who writes to me is fortunate, I believe, for she was raised in the Catholic tradition where there was developed a hunger for the sacraments. The elders in Geneva in the 16th century knew that the sacrament had become a routinized, too often mechanical magical ritual, and so they instituted a practice that has continued in the Reformed tradition to the present. In our tradition, according to our Rules of Order, it is a quarterly celebration—four times a year. As you have heard me say many times, what actually happened is that the good intention to make it special has backfired in that it has become optional. You cannot develop a taste for the Eucharist, taking it four times a year.

The opening word of the Old Testament lesson was "Observe," and that word *observe* or *observance* is often connected with religious ritual. Thomas Moore says in *The Care of the Soul*, that we are "to observe our soul," we are to become attentive to ourselves, we are to become aware of ourselves. What's going on in us? What are we thinking? We are we feeling? What are we experiencing? Take a step back, reflect on ourselves. Be self-reflective in order to understand what's going on in us. Awareness or attention. To observe. The *serve* in observe is an old word that comes from tending sheep. It is as though we were tending our soul. But that word then goes with the practice of religious rituals too. We observe Holy Communion. We observe the Sacrament of Baptism. And in the observation, something happens to us if that observation becomes a part of us. Not if it's an incidental observance, once in a while, but if it is a regular keeping, a

regular observance, it begins to shape us. You don't have to observe Christmas. You can be Scrooge. You don't have to trim the tree and hang the socks and wrap the presents. You don't have to do any of that. You could just come to church. That's what it's all about. But if you don't trim the tree and hang the socks, and delight the children, your Christmas will indeed be a kind of Scrooge-like experience. But, if you trim the tree, and wrap the presents, and create the aura, if you observe Christmas, you will experience Christmas. The world becomes a softer place at Christmas. Miracle of miracles. Year after year. There is something in the observing that washes over us and shapes us and forms us. It is no different with the celebration of the Eucharist. In the observing of it there is a forming in us. As my correspondent said, "For a moment the mind, the brain stops, and I am open to pure experience—a kind of depth moment, a holy moment. A fleeting moment of knowing God's presence." Eucharist is commemorative sacrament. That is, we do it again and again and again. We do it in regular fashion in order that that to which it points might be brought to us again and again.

Baptism is an initiatory ritual. Once is enough—marked as belonging eternally. One baptism, but many feasts at the table of our Lord. The background of that was just like Israel's experience. That sacrament of Baptism parallels the sign of circumcision in the old experience of Israel. And this table parallels the Passover Feast. It was a feast that Israel celebrated annually in order to remember and to hope, and in the meantime to experience the presence. The instruction to Israel was that they were to eat in a fashion that would remind them of that night when they were delivered from the bondage of Pharaoh's Egypt, when with a mighty hand God set them free. They were to roast the lamb and they were to eat bitter herbs so that they would remember the years of affliction—remember that from which God has sprung them free. And in the contemporary celebration of that feast, still in the Jewish tradition, as Rabbi David Hartman in Muskegon said recently when he told about the celebration of the Seder in his own family, the little children would watch until after the meal when he would pour the cup of wine for Elijah and they would say, "Daddy, will Elijah come?" And he would say "Sh-h-h-h, listen. Maybe he will come. Close your eyes. Is he coming?" And when his children would say, "Daddy, if he would drink our cup at our Seder feast, at all the Seder feasts he wouldn't be able to walk." To which the Rabbi said, "If you are the prophet Elijah you could handle it, you could handle all the chalices of all the Seder feasts." During the Passover celebration the door is always open, and the youngest child is sent out to the open door to see if Elijah is coming. Fantasy? Did you ever put cookies and milk out for Santa Claus? You see, children know that when he stops by on Christmas Eve he will have a snack and maybe be generous. Fantasy? Yes, like pouring the cup for Elijah, because we need to live with hope and expectation. The cry of the Jewish family is, "Next year in Jerusalem!" I wonder what it was like the first time that the Jews actually returned to Israel and a family sat down for their Seder meal, when after all those years they had said, "Next year in Jerusalem." Doesn't it give you goose bumps to think of it?

Do you think that anything is afoot in the world? Is God doing anything in the world? Do you live with any kind of hope? I don't know how it will happen. Jesus said, "I won't drink this again until I come in the kingdom." Obviously he thought he was on the edge—at the end. He wasn't, was he? Here we are two thousand years later. Paul said, "We will not all die but certainly will be changed." Paul expected that. It hasn't happened now, but Jesus has risen; that's the first fruits. The first seeds have been planted, and the harvest would follow very soon. It hasn't happened. Jesus was wrong, Paul was wrong, Wrong in terms of the immediate end of things, but not wrong in the ultimate set of the heart, which is of hope and anticipation. Believing that whenever, however this God who has been in our past, this God who has met us in the past, intervened in our life, came to us, was the Word made flesh in Jesus. This God is the God of our future, the one from whom we have come, the one who has come to us, the one to whom we go, the one who is coming to us.

And, in the meantime, in this in between time, the God who is with us. Breathing—breathing—breathing through water that marks us as belonging. Breathing through bread that becomes body. Breathing through wine that becomes blood. It is all so wonderful. It is a great pageant. It is a great way to live—between memory and hope. Sustained in the present moment. Mind shut down. Just open so that, even if just for a fleeting moment, I might be present with God and God present to me.

Well, did it happen this morning? It doesn't always happen. It is not something that is automatic. It is not something that is magical. But, did it happen this morning? Was there a taste of bread and wine that said to you, "God has been gracious. God will be gracious. God has marked me. God will enfold me. And even now, dear God, I know here, face to face, now in bread and wine, but one day with unveiled face we shall behold God and we shall be made like God for we shall see God as he is." Beloved by God. What manner of love with which we have been loved that we can be called the children of God? "And of such we are now and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is." Between memory and hope, just now, just a fleeting moment, I know the reality of the presence of the Living God. Thank God.