

Eucharist: A Means of Grace, A Sign of Presence

From the series: The Sacramental Character of the Church

Text: Exodus 13:8; Mark 14:23-24

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

You shall tell your child on that day, it is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt. Exodus 13:8

... This is my body. ...This is my blood... Mark 14:23-34

Jesus knew now that inevitably he would die. It must have filled him with all kinds of questions. We know that he left the supper and went into the garden and was stricken with grief - his soul full of anguish. We know on the cross he cried out in dereliction, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus was not a marionette on a string, simply going through the motions as though he was some invader from outer space, some extraterrestrial visitor who was sent down by God to execute a certain plan and then return again. Jesus walked this way, slugged it out in the genuineness of his human existence, fully faithful to the vision, to the calling he understood himself to be called to. And now inevitably he was going to die. Everything that he had claimed was seemingly crashing in around his head. The New Testament scholar Edward Scheelebeeks says that at least in this supper, at least in this moment, Jesus just had begun to appropriate his death into whatever God was doing in him and through him. He must have known now that, unless he had totally gotten his signals crossed, unless his life would come to futility, somehow or other what God was doing, inaugurating God's rule would have to be comprehended in this inevitable death that loomed before him.

It was Passover and as a faithful Jew, Jesus would keep Passover with his disciples. As he gathered with them, feeling already the weight of the morrow, he took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them and said, "This is my body." And when they completed the meal, he poured another cup and said to them, "This is the covenant in my blood. And when you eat this bread and drink this cup know that I am with you. Remember me."

It must have been in reflecting on Jesus' death and his resurrection and the amazement of the encounter with the living Lord after Easter that the Church

began to formalize that meal. It was obviously in the pattern of the Old Testament - God delivering Israel from the bondage of Egypt. Moses said to Israel, each year on the anniversary of this deliverance celebrate this meal, this Passover feast. And so they remembered and experienced again the deliverance of God from the bondage of Egypt, and on the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus at Passover time, gathered with his disciples around the table and gave that Passover feast this twist that now it would be a remembrance of him, of his death and of his life. And through two thousand years the Church, as its central act of worship, gathered at the table, broke bread, poured the cup and remembered Jesus.

Remembering is an important part of our human experience. This week as a nation we will pause and remember the birth of this nation. For us the 4th of July has lost some of its luster, I suppose. We don't know tyranny and oppression, by and large. Some of those who have just emerged from it will tell you how deeply moved they are at the celebrations that remind them of their roots and their past, able now again in the freedom that they know, to celebrate them with joy. But we will pause and we will remember, and yet what we will do on the 4th of July is really nothing compared to what Israel was called to do by Moses.

The understanding of that ritual, that celebration, in their experience, in the categories of their thought, in their language, was to call them not simply to remember an ancient event but, remembering, to bring it present, to represent it, so that they could with each succeeding generation enter into that experience. The youngest child had a part to play. We've celebrated Passover suppers here at Christ Community during Holy Week, and the youngest child has a part to play because that youngest child is to be incorporated into the experience. Not just ancient history, but the present experience of being a people of God's grace, separately claimed. Each generation was to enter into the experience personally to appropriate that which was celebrated with joy centuries before. Maybe the closest we come to it is the spiritual, "Were You There When They Crucified Our Lord? Were you there when he rose up from the grave?" Not simply to remember something past, but, as it were, to bring it into the present - to experience its power even here and now. That, I think, was the Hebrew experience of Passover and is to this day. And that was the model on which Jesus, when he gathered with his disciples at the table, was saying to them, I suspect: "I don't know what in the world God is doing but, somehow or other in my presence with you, God is present to you and in this cup of fellowship, in this bread, we are one, and in whatever future God has in store, I will be with you there as well. So take bread, remember me. Take the cup. Know my presence."

One of a former century wrote these words which I think are rich with imagery, trying to grasp what it is that happens when we taken these elements.

The blood that we must drink or have no life in us, that precious blood of Christ is not the blood of his poor crucified body. But it is of that body of

which he is the head and we are the members. It is the life's blood that flows from his heart of hearts into the veins of us his spiritual members. It is the blood that is the very life of him who living by the Father drinks the very wine of God and of heaven, and which becomes in us the very life of God.

Sounds mystical. I don't know quite how to understand that, but the intention should be clear. Jesus gave us something that, like the Passover feast down through generations, would incorporate each new child of covenant grace into the experience of God's grace.

The Church is a place where the means of grace are regularly offered. We speak of baptism and the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper - those two sacraments. There are more I think. And we speak of the preached word as the means of grace: a channel, a vehicle, a way by which somehow or other God's grace becomes tangible in our experience - a way beyond the idea and the truth of it to the experience of it. A means of grace.

In the Church we have the baptismal font with its water, by which we are initiated and have that sign of belonging. And we have this table set with bread and cup by which we come to remember, but, in remembering, to *experience* the presence of our Living Lord, who binds us together as brothers and sisters and sends us out forgiven and renewed again, energized, enlivened with the life of God flowing through us to be God's people in the world. The Sacramental Character of the Church: How can I preach? How can I use words that might enable you to experience?

I said last week, I come to doubt preaching, preachers, and sermons when I see the distortion. Oh dear friends, the distortion in the Church of the Word of God. When I hear sermons that twist the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, I wonder if it is not a time in the Church when we need a moratorium on preaching? Perhaps we ought simply to come here and baptize our young and those who come to faith and break bread, and drink the cup and hear the words, "I love you. This is my body. This is my blood. You are forgiven, renewed, embraced by grace. You, for all the world, for all time, just come here for a while without words."

Our Reformation tradition was a reaction, of course, a necessary reaction, and corrective at the time. And we claimed that we kept pulpit and table on the same level, but we didn't at all. The pulpit has loomed so large; the table has almost faded into oblivion. I am so conditioned by that. The shelves of my library are a parable: Last night I walked around them to my dismay. Although I knew it already, I actually got up from my desk and looked. On the shelves are yards and yards of books on preaching. Hardly six inches of books on the sacraments. I was so frustrated - I could preach to you for a solid year on the Eucharist and not mine the riches of its truth. I don't even know where to begin. I don't even know how to do it. I am feeling - probing after something - the sacramental character of the church! Our worship has been so anemic, so impoverished, and so noisy with

words. We have never learned to worship! And I find myself almost at a loss to lead you into a fuller experience of grace. How can I enable you somehow or other to taste and handle things on the scene? How do you experience God? How does grace reach you? What setting? Some of you would tell me that grace reaches you around the table of an AA meeting. Some of you might say simply to come into this place, to hear the music begin, to see the candles flicker, to have the table set. Some of you, simply feeling the body of the one next to you, reminding you that you are not alone and you are part of a community. I don't know how to tell you. But I do know that there is in the experience of the Eucharist a level of experience that does not come filtered through the head, but is able to move down through the head and into the heart and into the gut. We are so intellectually oriented, so word oriented, so impoverished in our worship. How can I help you, maybe even this morning, to have some fresh experience of grace made tangible?

I am moving in my own experience, to the frustration of some of you. It was said not so long ago by a very fine member of this congregation, "By now Dick Rhem ought to have his mind made up and know what he believes." Not so. Oh, I know in whom I believe, but there's so much more. We have been so impoverished in our experience, and as I said, I try myself to reach after it and find that it needs to be more than a head-trip. There needs to be those means - those vehicles of grace that can grasp us somewhere here so that grace become tangible.

Would you open your life to some new possibility? You have been so conditioned to come here and hear a sermon. You have been so conditioned to be a spectator in worship, to have something done to you and for you. Would you think that there might be a richer experience of worship than you have ever yet experienced? Could I invite you on a pilgrimage of opening your life to something more than the noise of words, that just perchance there might be some touch of grace? I understand the elders in Geneva in the 16th century. The Eucharistic celebration had become encrusted with custom and superstition, and magic, and abuse. I understand their reaction. I understand the elders of Geneva who said that Eucharist would be celebrated only four times a year, and then it will be special; then it will be exalted. I understand. But a great tragedy has stemmed from that. For I feel the feast has not become so very special. The greater consequence is that we lost our appetite for it. So many of us, born and bred on sermons, could even do without it. I believe the Church is on a shaky foundation if it lives by words alone. It is this water. It is that bread and that cup that keep us right at the heart of it all: the grace of God incarnate in Jesus Christ our Lord, who loved us and gave himself for us.

I remember, over fifty years ago, a Lord's Day as though it were yesterday. I must have been in kindergarten. I had gone to morning worship with my father and my three sisters. It was Communion Sunday. We came home and my mother was preparing dinner and my sisters were helping, and my father, as he often did, sat in the rattan rocker on the huge screened-in porch that spanned the front of the

huge, huge old house we lived in, and child-like I bounced up to him and said, “Daddy, when can I have that bread?” A child’s question moved him to tears and he looked up at me and said, “I pray for the day you have bread.” And I heard him tell that story time and time again. And I feel impoverished because I could not, as my grandchildren can here, sit between my father and mother and take the bread and take the cup. If only he could have taken me next Lord’s Day. If only I could have knelt with my father and received the bread and heard the pastor say, “Jesus loves you.” It would have been an impression more lasting even than that front porch scene.

I am so thankful that we are learning to take bread and cup, opening our lives to a dimension of the grace of God that comes in another way. I invite you to put away your resistance, to short-circuit your presuppositions, to let go of all your former experience and today for the first time take the bread, and take the cup and ask God to make Jesus alive to you. I invite you.