

## WAIT FOR ONE ANOTHER

Texts on Sunday, June 5, 2011

*Luke 14: 6-15; 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34*

**Y**ou are doing it all wrong, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. *Not everything, to be sure, but the main thing, your celebration of communion—why, it's not really communion. You're doing it all wrong.*

Are we doing it wrong, too? How would you know? What is the standard? Procedures in a church manual? Exact words of the Mass? Exact words of Paul? Can rules from a book get to the heart of it? What is the heart of worship? If there are 500 of them, how do you decide? Should we just do whatever they tell us? No! Certainly not. Take your crown!

Are we doing it right? In his book *Rabbi Jesus*, the biblical historian (and Episcopal priest) Bruce Chilton argues that what we're doing is not at all like what Jesus was doing in the last days and years of his life. Now, there's no law that says we Christians have to do what that very Jewish man Jesus was doing, but let's hear Chilton's challenge: Jesus could not possibly have thought to compare wine with his own blood, or bread with his own flesh. Why not? Because he was a Jew, Chilton emphasizes. Jews held in revulsion the idea of drinking the blood of sacrifice with the flesh. It is an abomination. Listen to Ezekiel, "Thus says the Lord God: You eat flesh with the blood, and lift up your eyes to idols, and shed blood—shall you then possess the land?" (Ezekiel 33:25) Citing other ancient rabbinic discussions, Chilton brings home how blasphemous it would be for a Jew to use the drinking of wine to symbolize drinking blood. And Jesus was first, even foremost, a Jew.

Now, all the gospels do portray Jesus enjoying table fellowship. He eats with anybody. He eats with everybody. Table fellowship was essential to Jesus' vision. Why? The table mattered because food is so intimate and goes so deep into us, that who we share our table with expresses and enforces our social identity. Jesus' society was constructed with laws of purity and impurity which kept classes and sexes separate. But Jesus' vision progressively broke through all that. No thing and no person was inherently impure. "Not what goes *into* the mouth defiles a person," he said, "but what comes out of the mouth." (Matt. 15:11) He saw the purity of God as *already given* in all the people—not acquired by means of rituals and incantations. Moreover, Temple sacrifices were not the sole acts by which God infused purity into Israel. Every meal provided people with the sacramental possibility of being blessed by becoming a blessing to others. "When you give a banquet, don't invite your friends or your family or your rich neighbors. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed."

What then did Jesus mean with his words about wine and blood, about one bread, one body? He meant that the Temple sacrifices of animal blood and flesh had lost power through corruption, and a new ritual was needed. He did not aim to start a new religion. Why, Jews had been worshiping in homes and synagogues for centuries. Still, most thought the annual priestly sacrifices assured the purity of the whole people. This Jesus now challenged. *The kingdom of God is among you*, he taught. We are all already purified. So, whenever he was together with his friends, holding the cup and indicating the presence of all with a gesture, Jesus would say of the feast, *This is my blood offering*. And with bread—*This is my flesh offering*. He would ask everyone to say it together—meaning, these meals, these relationships, this living parable of all humanity hanging together is the heart of our affirmation that God has come down in an irreversible incarnation.

So, are we doing it right? I think Prof. Chilton has it right about Jesus and the table fellowship, but I have shared in communion at Rev. Chilton's small church in the Hudson Valley, and I assure you they follow Rite II from the Book of Common Prayer (1982). So it's not that the church must eliminate the association of bread and wine with Jesus' crucifixion-resurrection. After all, if the earliest church had failed to establish a distinctive ritual to set it apart from the fellowship meals common to Judaism, it would not have been able to hold together as one body to celebrate the good news of crucifixion-resurrection. It is no wonder that Jesus' words—"*This is my blood offering*"—became *This is my blood*. And the change happened fast. In the generation after Jesus, the practice was already set when Paul handed on to the church at Corinth what, as he puts it, "I received from the Lord."

But we mistake Paul badly if we take but a few of his words and stick them in our worship manual—and drop his whole teaching. Remember the context. He is saying, *You are doing communion all wrong*. You are doing it for yourself. You are doing it to separate yourselves from people you dislike or fear. You are doing it to exclude the hungry and the poor. You are doing communion like a magic act to connect you with God, when the whole purpose of communion and of the church is to connect you with one another, especially with the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. *Then you will be blessed*.

How are we doing? How would you know? Paul's answer is pretty simple. *What you are doing is killing you*, he says. *You have become weak and ill. You are dying off*. In other words, wrong worship has bad consequences for the community. *But if you judged yourselves*, he continues—that is, if you were to hold yourselves accountable to the standard of Christ's love now showing up as love of one for one another, and if you refused to accept

substandard behavior from any member of the church—*then you would not be judged with this withering away*. That’s how Paul saw it. A church will not suffer weakness, provided its people imitate Christ Jesus in their intentions and actions, and hold each other to that standard. It all begins with this feast.

So we see that while the beloved ritual words of the church—*This is my blood, shed for you*—probably go far wide of Jesus’ meaning at his suppers, still the purpose of the feast, as Paul saw it, was the same as Jesus’ purpose: to break from the corruption of religion at the hands of willful, greedy, and powerful people by practicing radical inclusion of all people from every class and clan. How are we doing?

I think Temple religion still threatens to overwhelm Christian worship in America, if by “Temple religion” we can mean the belief held by some religious people, lay and ordained, that some people and some rituals have special powers to work God’s blessing; that there is one right way to worship; that some offerings to God are mere entertainment and others are holy, according to standards that have nothing to do with love and fellowship; indeed, that correct performance during worship is more important than human relationship in the community of worship. These are all signs that Temple religion rules in a church. To put an end to the errors of Temple religion, Jesus lived his life, Jesus lifted his cup—*This is my blood offering*—; and at the hands of power and greed and fear, Jesus died that all might live, and live together, abundantly, beyond the Temple. *Pro fanum*.

Now, I have been blessed to minister with some churches burgeoning with new participants. Anyone could see what the new people were responding to, and on that account, I have come to believe that very many who don’t go to church are actually very serious about Jesus and about the church. It’s just that they are waiting to see a church that looks like Jesus. And then they come. Passionate, diverse, creative, open-minded, young, old, single, not, gay, straight, of every color, why, even of every creed, they come. They take their crowns. They discern the body and they have communion.

So let us think about the communion of The Riverside Church. How blessed are we that people of so many nations and colors, and yes, often even of many creeds are here. But how are we doing with the lame, the blind, and the poor? With men and women from prison, with people struggling with drugs and alcohol, with prostitutes and tax collectors? How are we doing with plain old young people, people who were not raised in the idioms of hymn singing, organ, and preaching?

The funny thing about a sound church is that, contrary to the can-do American way of business, you don’t have to set up programs to “serve

them.” In fact, programs are often part of the problem of a withering church, if they create an artificial distance, a separate space for “them” to be served in. What Jesus did, what Paul taught, is to make the worship the center of human relationships. To make communion a community. So the question for this down-by-the Riverside Church is, What burden will we lay down? You know the world is watching. You know the world is wanting to see a church that looks like Jesus. In this city, nothing could keep this space from filling with humanity, provided . . . we learn to wait for one another. Provided this celebration itself tells the love story of Jesus in ways that strangers of every class and kind can actually feel and see and hear.

So what is going to happen? Will they come? If the place looks like Jesus, yes—but that will mean changes, won’t it? Don’t worry, I am not going make those changes. That would be the old Temple religion model, where the priest does the stuff. No! Take your crown! I offer you some questions.

We call our communion “the joyful feast of the people of God.” At which kind of feast do you experience more joy—at a warm, loving party, or here in the communion service? If a warm, welcoming party seems more generous in joy, then is our worship just and right? Does the solemnity of a communion service help or hinder the Jesus celebration of radical human fellowship in this hall? Does the expensive silver service bring you into touch with your neighbor? Does it separate you? Do you sense from Paul’s urgent words that no one should ever sit alone during communion, any more than you would let a guest alone at the far end of a table? This is the Lord’s table, who has brought you together. Get up. Go sit with her. No one is a stranger. Be together. Serve one another in gladness and joy.

“When you come together to eat,” says Paul, “wait for one another.” Can you imagine holding the elements for your neighbor, exchanging a regard of honor before she partakes, never hurrying, just as you do at home? Can you feel what energy you would release if you spoke aloud to him: “The body of Christ.” What is all this whispering and nervousness? You know your host! Christ has no time for solemnities. Sketching out his life of Jesus, Prof. Chilton observes that Jesus was steadily “shedding conventional identity in order to define a new self.” I thought, That’s it; that is how God’s future always comes, wherever God gives life. Come then, shed conventional identity. Those who aim to save their life will lose it. Wait for one another.

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