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Sermon 9.6.09
“Grace We Can Taste”
1 Cor. 11: 23-26/John 6:53-59

Do Presbyterians believe that the sacraments are a “symbol” of Jesus, or is the sacrament actually the Body of Christ?

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

23For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” 25In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 26For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Come, Holy Spirit, and nourish us with better food than we could ever purchase: your Word, your love, your daily bread for life’s journey, in the company of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The second reading comes from John 6, about twenty-four hours after Jesus fed 5,000 people.

John 6:53-59

53So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

Do you ever find yourself in the middle of a chore wondering why you bother? Wiping the bathroom mirror, pulling weeds, moving shoes to the closet? One of the most common daily chores that gives rise to this thought around our house is the task of making dinner. Eric and I do share this task, and most of the time we enjoy it, but there are nights when we say, “We have to make dinner *again*? We want to make nice dinners for our family, but sometimes we are acutely aware that a dinner made with sweat and tears over a two-hour period is appreciated and enjoyed just about as much as tomato soup and grilled cheese. At the end of either meal, we’ve got dishes in the sink. And the next morning, we all wake up and we’re hungry all over again. The writer of Ecclesiastes had it right when he said, “I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and...all was vanity and a chasing after wind” (Eccl. 2:11). Scholarship is inconclusive about who wrote Ecclesiastes; some say Solomon, some say someone much later than Solomon, but one thing is for sure: this guy was in charge of making the meals at his house. All is vanity and a chasing after wind.

I wonder if this passage from Ecclesiastes came to Jesus' mind when he fed that crowd of 5,000. Did he ever think, "Why should I bother? They're just going to be hungry tomorrow." The feeding of the 5,000 *is* an odd sort of miracle, if you think about it. In most of his miracles, Jesus makes a permanent change in peoples' lives. He heals the sick, the blind, the lame, not just temporarily but permanently. Just a few chapters earlier in John, he changed water into wine, not just for an hour but for the duration of the party. I mean, can you imagine Jesus saying, "If you want wine, you had better act now – because it turns back into water at midnight!" If Jesus' miracles only had a temporary effect, he surely would not have been known as a savior.

So why did Jesus bother dealing with something as temporary as a meal? Wouldn't it have been smarter to spend all his time proving the *lasting* effects he had on people's lives?

Maybe you've never thought about the temporary nature of the sacrament of Lord's Supper, but it does make a peculiar sort of memorial. Jesus told us that every time we eat bread and drink wine or juice with a community of believers, we remember him; in the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians, "we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Why would Jesus leave us with something as temporary as a meal to memorialize him? Wouldn't a rock be a more appropriate memorial? Churches could put a nice big boulder in the center of their worship space and remember Christ every time they looked at that rock. They could remember the undying love of Christ that never changes, that is there from age to age. But instead, Jesus left us with instructions to remember him by eating and drinking; after finishing, there wouldn't be any lasting evidence like there would be with a rock; all evidence would be swallowed! What kind of memorial is that?

But maybe the Lord's Supper isn't supposed to be a memorial.

This brings me to answer the question of faith that was posed: Do Presbyterians believe that the sacrament is a "symbol" of Jesus, or is the sacrament actually the Body of Christ? When Jesus said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me," were we to take it literally or figuratively? I have to say that almost every question of faith you all posed this summer has been something that Christians have agonized over throughout the centuries. Questions like today's question have divided the Church; new denominations have formed over it. One of the earliest understandings of "eat my flesh, drink my blood, this is my body" was that it was to be taken very literally. Largely because of the reigning philosophies at the time, Christians believed that the bread and the wine miraculously became the flesh and blood of Christ when the blessing was spoken over them. This remains to be the official Roman Catholic position. On the other end of the theological spectrum, Baptists would say that Christ is symbolized in the meal; we remember Jesus' sacrifice and the forgiveness that is ours when we eat the bread and drink the juice. The meal is a memorial to Jesus. What do Presbyterians believe? As you could probably guess, we are somewhere in the middle. We do not believe that the substance of the bread and wine changes, although we will admit that in the meal, God is doing something beyond our understanding. Nor do we believe that the meal is merely a symbol that reminds us of a greater truth; we believe that the *Spirit* of Christ is present at the meal, and that by the power of that Spirit, *we as the gathered community* are the ones changed as we eat and remember.

And so we come back to the question, why did Jesus leave us with such a temporary act as a meal? Perhaps it does not mean that God's power is ineffective or not lasting; it is simply the most fitting way to embody who Jesus was among us, and how he continues by the Spirit to bring about change in us.

The fact that the Lord's Supper is celebrated with such temporary elements as bread and wine or juice points to our central belief about the nature of God: in Christ, God dared to enter into our temporary human existence. Humans get hungry. We get lonely. We get hot and then cold, we feel happy and then sad, things wear out, our bodies fail. We cannot function without feeding our bodies over and over. Into the sometimes frustrating temporality that we cannot escape, God entered; John says that "the Word *became* flesh" -- God became human -- and by his life, death, and resurrection, declared that our short, fragile lives are not meaningless; they are part of a larger story of redemption and hope.

Why did Jesus bother dealing with something as temporary as a meal? Wouldn't it have been smarter to spend all his time proving the *lasting* effects he had on people's lives? The wonderful irony—the *gospel* -- is that *only by entering into the temporary*, by becoming subject to a fragile, needy human body and to a very human death, did Christ have a lasting effect.

Now, when we share the body and blood of Christ in worship, the Spirit does stir us up and change us. The lasting memorial, the reminder that Christ has redeemed and is redeeming the world, is in us. We leave worship carrying within our bodies and souls the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. We carry that reality into homes and hospitals, schools and offices. We carry it into places where all may seem futile and temporary, but we know different.

Sometimes, when I've led a discussion of the Lord's Supper in confirmation classes, the students will be really honest with me. "If we are changed like you say when we eat communion, then why don't I feel different? I eat the little piece of the bread and drink the juice, and I pray and concentrate, but nothing seems to happen." I think the problem is that we tend to think of communion as an individual act. But it is a community meal, a family meal. Eric and I make dinners for our family night after night and make that time a priority because we trust that over time, our family identity will be shaped only by coming together over and over again. We hope to nurture a family identity of love and acceptance, of passion and concern for others. Some dinner times are good, some are not so good. But over time, I have to trust that the repeated act of coming together will have an effect -- it will shape us. And it is no different for the Christian community. The Spirit of God *is* shaping us into a hopeful community, through the ups and downs of history, as we keep coming back to this table.

Today, when we eat this meal, a meal that we've eaten before and we'll eat again, we declare to each other and to the world the *lasting* effects of Jesus Christ, the bread of life.

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