

CEC Maundy Thursday 2011

“Every time you eat this bread and drink the cup,
you are announcing the Lord’s death until he comes again.”

This verse from 1 Corinthians is often spoken or chanted
as an invitation to communion in some churches,
inviting the congregation to respond, shouting,

“Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again.”

We know this part. We say it every week in some seasons.

But few are likely stop to think how jarring these words are.

What does it mean to “announce the Lord’s death?”

How does such a statement invite the congregation
to shout out the Lord’s death and resurrection?

What is it about the communion meal that such words surround and infuse it
with meaning far removed from our cultural expectations?

Some understand this to mean that all pleasure,
anything but suffering and pain,
are to be stripped of meaning.

Watch some folks as they march solemnly to communion:
they look like they are coming in pain, or at least in shame.

Their eyes are averted. Their lips are pursed,
the corners of their mouths level, if not turned down,
their countenances dour, for the most part.

Now mind you, they have been taught to look this way,
taught that reverence and decorum require that downcast disposition,
if not for all of life, then at least for this meal.

They have “the Lord’s death” part down certainly.

It is the joy at his coming that they don’t seem to grasp.

It is the life of Christ, shared for the sake of the world,
the life of the community full of hope and expectation that seems to be lacking.

The meal becomes a funeral under the weight of such attitudes
and we become mourners, but in some sense it is our funeral too.

This is a very incomplete picture of what this meal is and what it does.
one that leaves us focused on grief and death.

But neither is the opposite approach a complete picture.

The modern pious reaction to pious morbidity
is to proclaim a life without death, grief or end,
to jump to Easter without participating in the death of Christ.

This is “feel good” but hardly honest.

It leads us further and faster down the path that encounters meaninglessness in death
and feels betrayed by the denial and the lifelessness of our culture’s false promises.

Both incomplete pictures of the drama are alive and well, in the church and outside.

We do not face the reality of God’s gift,
in either the depth of its sacrifice or the joy of its love.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

How many of you have seen the movie, “Babette’s Feast,”
or read Isak Dinesen’s original story?

The premise is a simple one, yet underlying that is a rich parable on tonight’s gospel.
A poor Danish community has lived in the shadow of death for a long time
under the stringent teachings of their now departed pastor,
whose work of simple charity is carried on by his unmarried daughters,
Martina and Phillipe.

Into this world crashes a French woman, Babette,
who has been made homeless by the revolution in France.
The sisters take her in and she uses her skill as a chef
to make the ministrations of food delivered to the community’s poor a little tastier.
Though the “spice” Babette adds to the food is considered to be naughty, if not sinful,
still all give thanks (and even smile) for Babette’s presence.

Then news comes that Babette has won the lottery in France,
a large sum of money.

The community fears that she will leave them,
fears that mount as Babette announces
that she will make a Feast for the small gathering.

The simple folk are aghast as they see the exotic food—
pheasants, turtles, not to mention the wine—
all for the coming feast.

They don’t want to be impolite,
but are afraid they will be possessed by some demon if they partake in the feast.
It is not proper; it is not seemly. It is too much!

Unaware, Babette prepares and serves the finest meal they will ever eat.
And the meal transforms them.

Their bitter disputes and long secret indiscretions
dissolve into the peace and harmony of God’s future kingdom,
evidenced as they finally leave the meal singing
a hymn of praise and faith in that future.

But the prospect of Babette leaving the community
with her newly acquired wealth still looms.

In fact it is now more bitter, since her gift of the meal.

So the sisters approach her and ask her about it.

Babette confesses that she has spent the entire fortune on the one evening meal,
and humbly asks if she may continue to stay and serve the community.

It is then that you realize the extraordinary gift of grace that is the center of the story.

It isn’t about money, it’s about Babette’s gift of self in joy and freedom,
about her being a servant,

and yet finding the fullness of her humanity in that servanthood.

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My thoughts fly immediately to Jesus
and his gift of offering radical hospitality to all whom he meets.
Now, on this night when he would give himself over to ultimate servanthood,
he takes a moment to teach those gathered in that upper room, to teach all of us, really,
about how we also will find ourselves fully human,
and fully embraced by God as we take the servant role, as he did.

Which brings me back to communion.
We dare not make this meal
into the personal pietistic rite of our individual forgiveness.
As we say in one of our Eucharistic Prayers:
“Forgive us from the presumption of coming to this table
for solace only and not for strength, for pardon only and not for renewal.”
Understood in the context of Jesus the servant,
communion is a meal that exemplifies the statement, “you are what you eat.”
Though in this case it might be “you become what you eat.”
And by you, I don’t mean individuals, I mean the gathered community.
We are the body of Christ, the Church.
The meal—really, the Feast—Christ prepares for us in communion
serves to shape us into the very thing that God has called us together to be.
As we share in this feast we become the sign of God’s presence in the world.
And that presence is a serving presence.

In communion we are transformed—
or we can be, if we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us—
we find both solace *and* strength, pardon *and* renewal.
Having received *this* extraordinary gift of grace,
we are sent into the world, in mission to the poor, the outcast, the lowly.
Singing our hymn of praise and faith, we go out to transform the world.
We are not sent in some patriarchal way,
as if we have the goods and we are kind enough to share them (how patronizing).
Instead we are sent as lowly among the lowly.
As washers of feet, we do the dirty jobs reserved for the lowest classes of people.
We spend ourselves and in the process we too discover
what it means to be fully human,
to fully know the depth of sacrifice and the joy of love.
It is this meal, this event that shapes us just this way.

Jesus is right to tell Peter that if he doesn’t participate in the washing he won’t get it.
We would do well to heed these words.
When we understand that the Lord of all dares to strip down
to wash us, to feed us, to spend his life for us,
then we, who dare to call ourselves his followers,
find our faith leading us to do the same.
For faith means no more and no less
than trusting Jesus’ way of being in the world.

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On this night, that way becomes crystal clear.
Our journey will lead us to this meal of life-giving death and deep sorrow.
We too will journey to the cross on Friday,
through the holy mystery of Saturday,
and to renewed life and great joy on Easter Sunday,
when the meal will be transformed into a Feast of rejoicing indeed.
And the first step of that journey is a bowl of water and a towel,
a bit of bread, and a sip of wine.

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