

**EUCCHARIST**  
Randall Tremba  
Nov. 6, 2016  
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

\* \* \*

I am departing from the lectionary schedule this morning and next in order to offer some reflections on the sacraments. Today, communion or Eucharist; next Sunday baptism.

The first lesson is one of my favorite verses.

*You bring forth food from the earth, wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.* (Psalm 104:14-15)

In other words, all that we need is given to us from the earth. *Bread* and all it represents to make us strong. *Wine* and all it represents to gladden our hearts. And *oil* and all it represents in the plant world to keep us healthy.

Such gifts from God or, if you prefer, from Mother Earth should fill us with gratitude and thanksgiving which is the primary meaning of Eucharist. So even before we get to what we call communion, or the Eucharist, we have countless reasons to be a Eucharistic community.

And that brings us to the gospel lesson.

Then Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup, saying, "This cup is poured out for you. It is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:19-20)

\* \* \*

Last Sunday I offered a reflection on my use of "assembly" to designate our time here together. "Assembly" is not intended to replace more familiar words like "worship service" or "liturgy" but rather to enlarge them. Traditional words can't be tossed away and I certainly don't expect "Sunday Morning Assembly" to replace "worship service." It's about addition; not subtraction.

We can't eliminate the word "god" or "Heavenly Father" from our vocabulary but we can add other names like Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Mothering Hen, Merciful, Wisdom, Breath, Light, Love and many others. Addition; not subtraction.

God is she and he and it and something more and none of those.

We can't eliminate the words salvation, heaven, hell, or blood from our tradition. And so I translate "blood" as love.

If we were to sing the gospel hymn that I sang as a child: *There is a fountain filled with BLOOD drawn from Emmanuel's veins*; I'd ask us to substitute "love" for blood. *There is a fountain filled with LOVE drawn from Emmanuel's veins.*

Thus we say, Jesus pours out, not his blood, but his love for the healing of the world. Both are true. One historic; one metaphoric. Addition; not subtraction.

At communion we say, *love poured out for you*; not the blood of Christ. His blood isn't magical; it's symbolic of passionate love for others. Jesus never wanted to be crucified; crucifixion was the consequence of the way he walked. *Walk with me and I will walk with you and build the land that God has planned*—no matter the cost.

This morning a table is set for communion, or as it is traditionally designated: *the Lord's Supper*. Or in catholic churches: *Mass*. Or in Orthodox churches: *Divine Liturgy*. Or more generically: *Eucharist* from the Greek word meaning "good grace," or thanksgiving. Here we often call it "The Table of the Beloved."

But this table looks nothing like the table setting of the Last Supper. What happened? What happened to whole grain bread and full-bodied wine in a rustic chalice? What happened?

2000 years of history is what happened. A movement was institutionalized. Over time Christians would upgrade the service ware to silver and gold plates and chalices because that meal was the most precious of their practices. Gold and silver conveyed their high regard for that meal. But for many of us now, gold and silver actually demean the meal.

Over those 2000 years some other very strange things happened.

*This is my body broken for you. Eat. This is my blood. Drink. Remember me.*

First century Jews heard rumors that the people in the Jesus movement were eating flesh and drinking blood. They called them cannibals. It was, of course, a misunderstanding of language.

That table ritual was central to early Christian practice and over time questions arose. *This is my body. This is my blood.* How is this Jesus body and blood? What is the meaning of "is?"

Some answered: once the words of consecration are spoken by the priest the particles of bread transform by alchemy into particles of Jesus flesh and the same with the wine. Bread becomes flesh. Wine becomes blood. A kind of healing drug that only authorized agents of the church could dispense "over the counter" as it were. That's called *transubstantiation*. An historic catholic view.

No, said others. That's weird! The particles of bread and blood remain unchanged. The particles of Jesus flesh and blood *join* the particles of bread and wine. That's called *consubstantiation*. An historic Lutheran view.

Our own John Calvin thought both views silly and said: *it's a mystery, folks. Forget molecular analysis and simply accept that when we gather as one Body around the Table Christ is really present.* That's called "The Real Presence." An historic Presbyterian view.

Over time and especially here, we have enlarged the meaning of the Table as being more than a re-enactment of the Last Supper. For Jesus the table was a cultural symbol at which he frequently, and scandalously practiced the ancient promise that one day we shall all live as one family. One heart, one love, one table, one family. All welcomed. All included.

That's the metaphorical table.

But we mustn't overlook the historical table, the last supper shared under the shadow of the cross.

That meal was most likely a Jewish Seder at which Jesus shockingly reframed (or, translated) the 600 year-old tradition of remembering how their God had delivered Hebrew slaves from Egypt by slaughtering the Egyptian firstborn children and then drowning Pharaoh's army in the sea. In Jesus' day, the Seder was an annual, ritualized meal to remember an Almighty, Warrior God.

At that meal, Jesus took up one of the designated cups from the Seder table and said in so many words: it's no longer about violence and revenge; it's now about forgiveness,

mercy and non-violence. This is a new covenant sealed with my blood as surely as our ancestors sealed their deliverance with the blood of an innocent lamb on their doorposts the night the murderous angels of death swept through the land of Egypt.

That's what we thought God was like, Jesus was saying. But that was a tragic misunderstanding. That was our violence and hatred projected onto God. Listen to me now. My life is what God is like. Mercy, love and forgiveness. Remember this way; not that way.

Sometimes subtraction is necessary.

Let us break open and pour out our lives, Jesus was saying, that others may live abundantly. You in me and I in you. One heart. One love. All are one. Let us love others even if it kills us.

Let us be bread. Let us be wine. Let us pour out our lives that others may live.

\* \* \*

**Hymn 523**  
"You Satisfy the Hungry Heart"