

The Body of Christ

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“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” – 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

If the series of sermons I’m preaching right now had a title, it might be “Scriptural Flashpoints.” I’m taking on a number of words, phrases, ideas, and narratives from the Bible that are difficult for us Christians to live by and, in some cases, make it difficult for us to live together.

Last Sunday, for instance, I preached about Jesus’s insistence that those who wish to enter God’s realm must be born again. That hot-button phrase comes from Jesus, not from me and not from Jerry Falwell or Billy Graham or any of the other promoters of a particular type of Christianity that defines being born again in a very specific, very narrow, and in some respects, very objectionable way. There’s a difference between born again and born again-ism, and most of us who were around in the last quarter of the last century know how blurred that distinction became.

To be born again is to undergo that unique spiritual transformation that makes you you, the you that God, rather than the world, created you to be. The truly born-again Christian is absolutely unique. She does not walk lock-step through a type of Christian life that became entirely predictable for anyone who remembers America in the last forty years.

She does not worship in a particular way, she doesn’t understand the Bible in a particular way, and she certainly doesn’t vote in a particular way and for particular candidates. She doesn’t necessarily fall to the right on the theological, social, or political spectrum; a right-wing Christian and a born-again Christian are not necessarily the same thing, although they’ve often been confused, especially in the minds of folks who don’t fall on the right end of the spectrum. Once upon a time, in fact, it was born-again Christians who worked tirelessly to abolish slavery, and that was such a left-wing notion in those days it was considered dangerously radical. And I read an article by Nicholas Kristoff recently in which he said that the westerners who’ve stayed to help the Syrian people through their current suffering are mainly the Catholics and the evangelicals. Those are two other words – Catholic and evangelical – I need to take on in this sermon series. Please stay tuned.

Last week, I was trying to defang an idea and a phrase that has divided us Christians miserably for about half a century, and I want to attempt the same thing this morning – and perhaps come closer to succeeding – with another phrase that has pitted us Christians against each other and made us a baffling irrelevancy to much of the world, and that phrase is “the body of Christ.”

In a few minutes, we'll be celebrating Holy Communion, and when I invite you to come forward to receive the elements, you'll first be offered a small piece of pita bread by a Eucharistic minister who may simultaneously say the words "the body of Christ." You'll next touch that piece of bread to the grape juice in a nearby chalice, while the Eucharistic minister holding that chalice may say "the blood of Christ." Then you'll eat the juice-stained pita bread and return to your seat via the side aisles.

What will have just happened? What do we think we're doing when we call a small piece of bread "the body of Christ" and some grape juice "the blood of Christ"? Are we enacting, are we re-enacting, or are we play-acting?

Let's start making our way toward some sort of answer where we always start Christian thinking, and that's back at the text, verses sixteen and seventeen of chapter ten of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which I take as my text: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

The first thing we should note is that communion, which is what Paul is describing, is fundamentally communal – it's a group activity. Whether you call it the mass, as our Catholic siblings do, or the Divine Liturgy, as our capital-o Orthodox siblings do, or the Lord's Supper as many of us low-church Protestants do, or the Eucharist, as most thinkers on the topic do, you're talking about the same thing, namely, one of the two principal sacraments or ordinances of the Christian church. The other is baptism, and both are the exclusive privilege of the Christian church. Communion, like baptism, is a rite of the church, and when we participate in that rite, we are acting on behalf of the whole church. I am acting on behalf of the church, and so are you. You are the representatives of the entire Christian communion at communion. No one celebrates communion by himself, just as no one baptizes herself. It is the community of believers who undertake these ritual actions on behalf of all believers everywhere and through all time and even beyond time.

One of the great privileges of my office of pastor is that when I lead all of you in the celebration of Holy Communion, I stand behind a table upon which often lies a runner with the names of the mothers of the church on it. It's a beautiful piece of linen on which, as part of one of our Vacation Bible Schools of some years ago, we inscribed the names of the women who had mothered us in this church, whether they were married or not, had ever physically given birth or not, or were related by blood or marriage to us or not. Mothering is far different from reproducing, and we all have had women in our lives who have nurtured us as mothers are ideally meant to do, and when I look upon those names during communion, I am powerfully reminded of that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us when we celebrate God's sacrificial love for the whole world.

We can all say our prayers by ourselves – you don't have to come to church to do that. We can all read our Bibles on our own, although that's a modern innovation in Christianity made possible by the invention of the printing press and affordable books in the fifteenth century.

You don't have to be with other Christians to pray or read your Bible. But in order to participate in communion, you must be in the presence of other Christians. None of us provides or receives

communion on our own. The very word itself means “sharing in common,” and those who share at Christ’s table are Christian believers, those who serve them, and, of course, Christ himself.

Ah, now there’s the sticky wicket – Christ himself. How is Jesus the Christ present at or in or through communion? In what way are the physical elements of bread and wine – pita and grape juice in our setting – the body and blood of Christ? There’s the point where differences in belief emerge, and the body of Christ which is the church becomes broken in a disastrous way.

Since the sixteenth century, the church has attempted to answer that question by focusing on the elements of communion; and that answer – transubstantiation – has created at least as many problems as it was intended to solve, and it’s never been a very satisfactory answer for many of us, Catholics and Protestants alike.

For me, the answer to the question of whether the living Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist lies not in the elements of communion, but in the participants in communion. The proof of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, I want to suggest to you this morning, lies not in what I do, but in what you do. Let me show you what I mean.

The Wednesday before last, we had a supper and listening session in the Social Hall so that the heads of the various ministries could hear what a struggle Sunday morning has become for our families with young children. One of the observations made during that conversation was that communion is one of the things children enjoy most here at Faith. As a pastor, that tells me that we’re doing something fundamentally right, because if children feel welcome at Christ’s table here, then others will probably feel welcome as well, and that’s the second thing we need to note about communion: it is above all else the meal of welcome.

Jesus said, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest,” and if we do not make that invitation clear in what we say and do at communion, then we’re making a grave mistake. God’s welcome in Christ Jesus is to everyone – John 3:16 says that God so loved the world, not a piece of it – and we Christians have erred terribly in using communion as a boundary marker to indicate who’s in and who’s out, who’s welcome and who’s not.

Many of us, I suspect, think of the Catholic-Protestant divide when you hear me speak of communion dividing us, but it’s important for you to know and for all of us to remember that we Protestants have subdivided ourselves along Eucharistic lines.

Remember those crusty old New England Puritans? They were the refugees fleeing the turmoil in the Church of England back in the early seventeenth century, turmoil of which they themselves had been at least partial instigators. Those folks with names like Cotton Mather and John Harvard and Roger Williams and Anne Bradstreet – those Puritans believed that the only true Christian believers were those who could say that they had undergone a life-changing spiritual conversion – that they had been born again – and that the true church was composed only of such born-again believers. And since communion is a sacrament of the church, only born-again church members were allowed to receive it. And if you were allowed to receive communion, you were known as a communicant member of the

church, and only communicant members of the church could vote and own property in those holy commonwealths that we now know as Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and the rest of New England. And that's the way it was for the first thirty or so years in colonial America.

But what about the children and grandchildren of those founding fathers and mothers? If they hadn't undergone the same sort of religious conversion their parents and grandparents had, were they to be denied membership in the church and the privileges that accompanied that membership?

Already by 1662, our Congregational forebears realized that we had painted ourselves into a theological corner by drawing sharp boundaries between who was in and who was out, and so we devised something called the "Half-Way Covenant" that allowed some church privileges, such as the baptism of the children of un-regenerate members, but denied others, such as voting and receiving communion.

So we in our Congregational tradition aren't strangers to using communion to distinguish ourselves from others, including other Christians. But to do so is to strike at the very heart not simply of what communion means, but even more, what it means to be the church. In communion, perhaps more than at any other moment in a church's regular worshiping life, we must reflect self-consciously on what we're doing and the messages we're sending. Specifically, do we see ourselves principally as the guardians of a theological and liturgical tradition, that we must preserve with painstaking attention to detail, or do we see ourselves as engaging our theology and liturgy as tools in the ministry of reconciliation? That, it seems to me, is the real question communion forces us to ask, and not whether the theological term transubstantiation accurately describes what happens when a priest says these or those words while doing this or that action.

Mission and missional are the sexy words right now among the church's chattering classes, and we've spent our share of time jaw-boning about the mission of Faith Church. I'm not worried about the mission of this church because I see what we're up to and I know that many of you are actively engaged in ministry beyond these four walls, and as long as the members of this church are out there doing their thing for the sake of God's love for the world, that's all the mission this church needs, as far as I'm concerned.

Some of you may have seen a poster on the bulletin board recently for Beds for Kids. Beds for Kids is an organization that provides beds for children whose families are too poor to provide them with proper beds. I'd never heard of Beds for Kids until Lynne Jones brought it to my attention a few weeks ago. She also brought it to the attention of some others of us here at Faith, and now, because of your generosity, there are at least a couple more beds for children who need them. If you'd like to help support that mission, have a look at the bulletin board or speak with Lynne.

Do you know about Liz Duncan's annual yard sale? It's coming up in a few weeks, and if you'd like to donate to it and/or help Liz with it, I'm sure she would welcome your support. Liz doesn't keep the money from her yard sale for herself; she always gives the proceeds to a local charity, and this year the proceeds from Liz's mission work will go to Wounded Warriors. Liz has been holding her yard sale for over fourteen years.

Tomorrow morning, some of us from Faith will be going downtown to the office of Senator Sherrod Brown to be part of the ceremony when Senator Brown receives an award from Bread for the World for his work on behalf of poor people in America and around the world. Our Bread team helps us remember that fighting poverty effectively means enlisting the help of leaders like Sherrod Brown, and feeding the hungry locally and globally has long been a part of our church's mission.

And finally, let me say a brief word about Ron Ober and my tombstone.

As many of you know, Ron Ober is the founder and director of Revydirect, a non-profit importer of fair-trade goods from village co-ops in Central America. In addition to being the founder and CEO, Ron is also the COO, the CFO, the receptionist, the office manager, and the executive in charge of marketing and public relations. In short, Ron is a one-man mission. Ron uses his own money to fly back and forth from Ohio to El Salvador to work with the women who make the jewelry, scarves, handbags, wallets, belts, and other items that Ron sells on their behalf here at Faith and at fair-trade shows across the country. Revydirect is Ron's way of responding to the call of the gospel for justice in an increasingly globalized economic system that is closed to those without the political clout and sufficient capital to force their way to its benefits. Although Ron's fair-trade convictions were born long before he and I met here at Faith, I'd like to think that I've done a little bit to help his outreach and mission work by supporting his efforts through prayer, by buying his goods when he sells them here at Faith and elsewhere, and by providing encouragement and hospitality in this church. And so when the time comes, I hope my tombstone will include the words, "Ron Ober was his one real success."

When Paul says that we are one body because we all partake of the one bread, which is Jesus the Christ, I think he's trying to remind Jill that she is part of Ron's work, and to remind Dave that he is part of Liz's work, and to remind Anne Marie that she is part of Lynne's work. All of those missional activities, and so many more I haven't had time to mention this morning – they all belong to us because the people who make them possible belong to us and we belong to them because we all belong to Christ. That's what the church is and that's what the church does. We are one body, nourished by one bread, the bread who brings life to the world.

Is that reason enough to struggle to keep this church alive? It is for me.