

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Rev. Julie Hill
“World Communion”
Isaiah 25:6-9; Luke 24:13-35
October 5, 2008
World Communion Sunday

“Mom, did you see Jesus?”

That was the question that our son Elliott asked me when I returned from serving communion one Sunday in Richmond. (And by the way, I did get permission to use this story.) Elliott was just 5 or 6 at the time. I had left him alone in the pew with the 8 or 9 year old son of another elder who was serving communion, Jesse. Jesse’s mom and I had given the boys strict instructions to stay quiet and behave while we were gone but you can imagine our anxiety level. When we returned from serving, Elliott and Jesse were smiling from ear to ear. Their expressions were quite a contrast to solemn faces of those sitting around them and I figured this meant trouble. When I sat down, Elliott excitedly whispered,

“Mom, did you see Jesus?” That was not what I expected to hear and frankly I did not know quite what to say. I wondered how in the world a question like that had come to his mind. And anyway, he was old enough to know that Jesus was not walking around Richmond. So I said, “Hmm. What exactly do you mean?”

“Did you see Jesus at communion?” This time I did the old standby for parents, and posed the same question to him, “Did you?”

With great joy, he exclaimed, “Yes!” Then he stretched out his arm and pointed to the reflections of light that were cast on the dark wooden ceiling by the communion ware and he said, “See those little circles of light up there? Jesse said those are angels. And see the real big one, the one right there in the middle. That’s Jesus. Jesse said Jesus is always here when we have communion.” i

Not bad theology really: “Jesus is always here when we have communion.” I thought about what I had been taught in officers’ training that we Presbyterians believe that through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is truly present with the gathered community in the Lord’s Supper. Then I thought about how distracted I had been during communion. And I reflected on the solemn expressions on the faces of those sitting near us and those I had served. I recalled the slow, almost mournful music that had been played while people were served. As I thought about Jesse and Elliott’s excitement and joy after communion, it seemed to me that these young boys had grasped what the rest of us had forgotten, or perhaps never really understood. The Lord’s Supper is the joyful feast of the people of God.

I suspect that many or even most of you grew up as I did, learning that the primary story for our understanding of the Lord's Supper is that of the Last Supper. Communion was to be somber, even penitential. It was not a joyful feast and never should be. I was told this week that one Presbyterian Church in the area, until recent years, required their elders to wear black suits when they served communion. A woman at *Gathering around the Word* last week said that when she was young, the children in her Methodist Church were instructed never to smile going up to or leaving the communion rail. When we focus on the Last Supper for our understanding of communion at the exclusion of post resurrection meals like the one we heard today, it is all too easy to find ourselves looking toward Good Friday instead of looking toward Easter Sunday.ⁱⁱ Viewed only through the lens of Maundy Thursday, the Lord's Supper becomes more of a memorial to God's absence than a celebration of God's presence with us. The Lord's Supper is not a funeral or a memorial to a departed hero, as Will Willimon puts it. It is a Resurrection meal with our Risen Lord.

On that first Easter afternoon, two of Jesus disciples began the seven mile trek from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were dejected and without hope. All they had believed in, all their dreams seemed to have vanished. They told the stranger who fell into step beside them that they had hoped (past tense) that this Jesus of Nazareth had been the one. Now it seemed the only wise thing was to accept with resignation the tragic sense of life. What else could they do? Now they were just going through the motions.

I imagine many in this community know what it is like to feel dejected; to feel like the foundation is crumbling and there is little you can do about it. The current economic climate and the roller coaster of news coming out of Wachovia this week have affected us all, I imagine. In addition, there are a number of people in our DCPC family who are coming to grips with difficult diagnoses or the death of a loved one or the serious illness of a close family member. I will leave immediately after worship for Charlotte where I will participate in the Service of Witness to the Resurrection for a dear seminary friend. It is easy for many of us, perhaps most of us this week, to understand at least in part how these disciples felt that Easter afternoon. Perhaps we too have just been going through the motions.

As these disciples sadly plodded along, Jesus interpreted the Scriptures to them and when they reached their destination they urged the stranger to stay for dinner. They had no clue who he was. And it was there, as they gathered around the family dinner table, that the guest stranger became the host. Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, just as Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave bread to his disciples at the Last Supper. And the text says their eyes were opened. They did not open their own eyes. It was not something they did, but something God did. The gift that came to them interrupted their "going through the motions," revealing in Word and Sacrament, Christ himself. And the shock of this recognition was that he had been with them all along. In their great joy, they ran back to Jerusalem and told the others all that had happened to them and how Christ was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

We too are often clueless. Like the disciples, we do not easily discern Christ's presence with us along the way or at this meal. Maybe that is part of why it is difficult for us to grasp the joyful nature of this feast. Even though we may say we believe that Christ is present in the action of the sacrament, we often do not know exactly what that means. We are embarrassed when we feel nothing. Sometimes the Lord's Supper feels like just going through the motions. And so what are we to do, but try to make the meal meaningful ourselves. We stew about it, scrunch our face up and try to feel sufficiently penitent or aware of the great sacrifice Christ made for us all. Or maybe we just feel guilty about not being able to conjure up the kind of meaningful experience we think we should have. Why don't I feel Christ's presence? Why are my eyes not opened? All of this takes our focus away from the gathered community, the community in which Christ has promised to make himself known. It zaps us of our capacity for joy because we have laid a heavy burden upon ourselves. Intent on making this meal meaningful, we too easily turn this family meal into a personal act of private piety. "The Lord's Supper is not each believer communicating separately with God and happening to be in the same room for matters of convenience and efficiency.... Christians come together because believers by definition are bound together."iii The Lord's Supper is a communal meal to be enjoyed in the company of one another.

Rather than struggling to get it right or make it meaningful, perhaps the most important thing for us to do is simply to pay attention to what is happening. A Word is spoken. Bread is broken. People are fed. God is the one who nourishes us with God's self. Jesus said, "Take, eat" He did not say, "Take, understand" or "Take, make meaningful." This is a gift. Remember the liturgy, "These are gifts of God for the people of God." The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not something we do my friends, it is something God does for us. The bread and cup are the normal food for Christians. Sometimes the service FEELS special and significant to us. Sometimes it does not. What is important is that you are fed.

If we understand no more than that, no more than that God is present with us and feeds us in this sacrament that is enough. And because it is God's actions that are important, it is God who does the feeding, we are free to dine with joy with our brothers and sisters in Christ and with our Risen Lord. And like the disciples, when we least expect it, perhaps we too shall find ourselves running to tell others that Christ was made known to us in the breaking of the bread and we will be surprised once again to discern that Christ has been with us all along, in ways unnoticed or recognized. Surely that is worthy of at least a smile. Indeed, I think it worthy of a joyful feast!

Come, eat and rejoice. O taste and see that the Lord is good!

AMEN

ⁱ This took place at Second Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA

ⁱⁱ It was The Rev Shelton Latham who used the language of “looking toward Good Friday instead of Easter Monday” in a discussion we were having on the topic.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stookey, pg 24.

I relied heavily on the following resources in this sermon:

Byars, Ronald. *The Bread of Life: A Guide to the Lord's Supper for Presbyterians*. Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2005.

Stookey, Laurence Hull, Eucharist: Christ's Feast With the Church. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.

Van Dyk, Leanne editor. *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Willima B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.
Chapter: “Eucharist / Eschatology.”

Willimon, William, *A Guide to Preaching and Leading Worship*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Chapter 4: “The Table and Font: Celebrating Baptism and the Lord's Supper.”

Willimon, William, *Sunday Dinner: The Lord's Supper and the Christian Life*, Nashville: Upper Room Books. 1981.

I also am indebted to The Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Currie III. Much of the latter part of this sermon was borne out of discussions with him.