

PROCLAIM THE DEATH OF THE LORD

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Reading: I Corinthians 11: 23-26 (NEB)

For the tradition which I handed on to you came to me from the Lord himself: that the Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread and after giving thanks to God, broke it and said: "This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me." In the same way, he took the cup after supper, and said, "This cup is a new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me." For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes.

Many years ago I was serving a United Methodist Church in Clermont, Georgia. One year we decided to hold a box lunch auction to raise funds. The basic idea was that each family, usually the wife and mother, would prepare a box lunch that would be auctioned off. These boxes were really large picnic baskets. The typical ingredients would include fried chicken, baked beans, potato salad, biscuits or corn bread, and a pie, cake, or cobbler. You would be mistaken to think that they all tasted the same. For example did the baked beans included brown sugar or molasses, sweet Vidalia or yellow onions, bacon or pork? Various combinations changed the taste and distinguished the cook. That is true for cornbread. Was the corn bread sweet or was it cracklin' bread with bits of bacon or sausage and chili peppers? How hot were the peppers? The greatest contest was in the desert department and each woman had a reputation for her blackberry pie, or peach cobbler, or triple layer chocolate cake. The men did most of the bidding and typically they would bid on a basket prepared by someone other than their wife. They figured that they tasted their own wife's cooking on a daily basis. The exception was Roger. Roger's wife, Alice, was truly a very fine cook. Roger loved her cooking and was not about to sacrifice it on the auctioneer's

block. The first bid for Alice's lunch was something like \$15.00. Roger bid \$20.00. Another raised it to \$25.00. Roger upped the bid. The other men realized that Roger was not going to be outbid so they continued to raise the ante. When it was all over with Roger paid about \$150.00 for his lunch.

The place of food is central in the Jewish and Christian traditions. I submit to you that the Christian faith begins at the table board. We break bread together. We invite people to the table. If unexpected visitors arrive we go down to the basement and gather up some folding chairs while others set more places at the table. Food is the fundamental expression of human hospitality and Holy Communion is the one of the central rituals of the Christian faith.

This passage that I read to you from Paul's letter to Corinth is set in the larger context of a controversy about the Lord's Supper. Part of the controversy has to do with how the common meal is shared. Paul's complaint is that some people are gathering in the household of faith and eating up all of the food that is meant to be shared with everyone. Paul says that some people are leaving church hungry. Who are these people? One might guess that those who arrive early are the wealthier members of the church. They are the 9 – 5 professionals. Those who come late are the working class members. Perhaps they are domestic workers who do not get off work until their employers have been fed and the dishes washed and floor mopped.

It is like arriving late for the church potluck supper. All of the chicken thighs, breasts, and drumsticks are gone. One dried up wing lies on a lonely plate. If you scrape the bowls there might be a serving of cold rice and peas and a bit of macaroni salad. The only dessert left is the slightly overcooked corner piece of brownie.

Paul tells the Corinthians that if you are that hungry eat at home before you go to church. Be sure that there is enough food for everyone. The idea is that at the Lord's Table everyone has an equal piece of the pie. Education and social standing make no difference. In God's economy everyone has a place at the buffet. The food is spread before all and all are welcome. There is no elitist privilege in the Lord's diner.

Paul then specifies the actual words of Jesus at the end of the Last Supper. Remember that Jesus and the disciples were celebrating the Passover feast. Like the Corinthians they gathered to eat a meal, perhaps of fish, lamb, unleavened bread, figs, and dates. They closed the meal with the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. Paul notes the movement of the common meal. Jesus took bread, gave thanks for it and broke it. He said, "This is my body, which is for you..." He then took the cup after supper and said, "This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood..." Today we call this movement the Great Thanksgiving, The Memorial, and the Distribution. You will find it in the order of Holy Communion that we will celebrate today. This is the Christian story of thanks, breaking, remembering, and sharing. It does not belong to the Roman Catholics, the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, or the Disciples of Christ. All over the world today Christians will celebrate this same basic pattern of Holy Communion.

Paul writes, "For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes." I find that a curious statement. It is a very strong, even uncomfortable, statement. Very clearly, it is not an "eat, drink, and be merry" proclamation. Is it not a little morbid?

Actually, no. Paul is not writing about the corpse of Jesus. He is not talking about the power of the Roman Empire to arrest someone, lash and mock him, and nail that human being to a cross. He is not talking about piercing the side of that dying man or breaking his legs so that the body would sink deeper to constrict the labor of breathing. Jesus died, you may recall, by asphyxiation; a kind of slow suffocation. The intended irony was that Jews were not allowed by Torah to eat the flesh of an animal that had been strangled to death. Such shame was intended on the part of Rome. That is not the story of the Lord's Supper.

The Eucharist, from the Greek meaning "Thanksgiving," is a celebration of the obedience of Jesus to the good news that God loves every human being, even the ones that put him on the cross. The brutality and violence of the Empire could not break the will of the Carpenter. They could break his body, and break his body they did, but they could not break his intention to be faithful to God. The power of his obedience proved to be greater than the power of death.

Paul instructs us to receive the Eucharist and proclaim the death of the Lord. He means that we are to be thankful for such obedience and live out such obedience in our own lives. Proclamation is not simply a verbal exercise. We all know that the best stories of faith are the living stories. The best way to announce the love of God is to live the love of God. Paul says that every time we celebrate the Eucharist we remember that our faith is meant to be a lifestyle. Doing the will of God in our every day activities is the life of faith. Christianity is not an ideology but it is a way of being in the world. It has very little to do with our credo and everything to do with how we

treat other human beings. Faith is not an announcement of belief it is the embodiment of what we know to be the will of God.

There was a tightrope walker, who did incredible aerial feats. All over Paris, he would do tightrope acts at tremendously scary heights. Then he had succeeding acts; he would do it blindfolded, then he would go across the tightrope, blindfolded, pushing a wheelbarrow. An American promoter read about this in the papers and wrote a letter to the tightrope walker, saying, "Tightrope, I don't believe you can do it, but I'm willing to make you an offer. For a very substantial sum of money, besides all your transportation fees, I would like to challenge you to do your act over Niagara Falls." Tightrope wrote back, "Sir, although I've never been to America and seen the Falls, I'd love to come."

Well, after a lot of promotion and setting the whole thing up, thousands of people came to see the event. Tightrope was to start on the Canadian side and walk to the American side. Drums roll, and he comes across the rope that is suspended over the most treacherous part of the falls – blindfolded and pushing his wheelbarrow! He makes it across easily. The crowds go wild, and he comes to the promoter and says, "Well, Mr. Promoter, now do you believe I can do it?"

"Well of course I do. I mean, I just saw you do it."

"No," said Tightrope, "do you really believe I can do it?"

"Well of course I do, you just did it."

"No, no, no," said Tightrope, "do you believe I can do it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Promoter, "I believe you can do it."

"Good," said Tightrope, "get in the wheelbarrow."¹

To proclaim the death of the Lord means that you have to get into the wheelbarrow and let the blindfolded one push you across the falls on a tightrope. To proclaim the death of the Lord means to climb aboard the conveyance of grace giving thanks and giving your life away. It means breaking bread and sharing a cup with all who hunger and thirst. This is the obedience that the Eucharist invites us to. This is the only celebration that will save the world.

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¹ Author unknown, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/faith.htm>.