

**CALM BEFORE THE CHAOS; 1CORINTHIANS 11:23-26; MAUNDY THURSDAY,
APRIL 13, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

When Paul writes his first letter to the church in Corinth, from which tonight's lesson is taken, it is a church deep in conflict and dysfunction. Several groups within the congregation were in sharp disagreement over theological correctness and some were even divided along the lines of social class and status.

We're talking a mere generation and a half after Jesus walked the hills of Galilee. Of course, Moses had only been gone forty days on the mountain when he came back to find that the people had fashioned a golden calf and were engaged in an orgy of cultic worship and fertility rites.

In utter frustration with their fickle faith and debauchery Moses smashes the tablets of the law, and who can blame him? But Paul, for his part, hearing of the discord in Corinth, channels his frustration and concern into two epistles.

1Corinthians is one of the great letters of the New Testament. He reminds them they are one community not a collection of cliques; that diversity is a gift to be honored; that leaders need the contributions of followers; and he writes – in one of the most sublime passages of the bible – that the greatest gift to the church, what makes it work despite itself, is love.

But before he enters into those topics, he does an inventory of the disconcerting reports about them, he tells them again of the role of the church, and the rights of an apostle, then he turns to the Lord's Supper which in their practice has been an occasion for one-upmanship and drunken behavior.

One marvels that Paul had the patience; that he even believed they could be salvaged. Yet, this is where his letter segues into a timeless vision for the church. In three short verses he redefines the sacrament of communion and the purpose of the church from a beer hall social club to an institution that aims for the transformation the world.

Paul takes them back to that night in the upper room when Jesus broke the bread and poured the wine. He gives them a first hand report of that moment on the eve of the trial and execution when the world stopped, a calm descended and they shared a simple meal together.

It reminds me of my first week at Yale Divinity School when the great Reformation historian Roland Bainton, then in his 80s, told us new students the story of the college and divinity school by recounting the contributions of the luminaries pictured in the portraits encircling the room; he started with Jonathan Edwards America's greatest theologian and ended with his own teacher and mentor Williston Walker pictured in a 1903 faculty portrait.

When I walked in the room I was a nervous first year student – having left a small church-related Midwestern college for a major Ivy League institution. By the time Bainton finished speaking, I was part of a revered history, tradition and family of clergy, scholars and missionaries and the torch passed down from Edwards was now in our hands.

What Paul writes onto the hearts of the Christians in Corinth in these three short verses is that this supper Jesus gave us is both a memory and a proclamation. A memory because Jesus said when we eat the bread and drink the cup we are to remember him.

The word 'remembrance' (anamnesis) appears in both the instruction for the bread and the wine; it says the Lord's Supper is part and parcel of and activated by the church's *memory of Jesus*. Jesus forged that link in the chain of memory in the upper room, when he said, 'when you do this remember me.'

We'd be lost without our memory; when a loved one dies, 'words of remembrance' in the service recall the minute details that made that person unique and special; we are admonished each year on Yom Ha-shoah to remember the Holocaust, lest history repeat itself. Memory is the life-line of civilization, as a guide for what we aspire to and as a warning for what we want to correct or avoid. When we eat the bread and drink the cup and remember the literal giving away of Jesus' life, we are fed by and become part of the same limitless love of God that was at work in his life. As Adel Davis said, "we are what we eat."

But memory is not all, for the act of remembering is also a proclamation that in his sacrifice and death the power of life is unleashed. Paul writes: "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes."

We are not just passive rememberers but partners, colleagues, and representatives of Christ; in the simple act of eating bread and drinking wine, we proclaim the same message Christ proclaimed that is the core of our faith.

Which Peter said on Pentecost is this: 'Jesus of Nazareth was handed over, crucified and killed. But God raised him up, having freed him from death because it was impossible to be held in its power.' That was the first Christian sermon ever preached. Death is defeated. The good news we proclaim when we eat the bread and drink the wine is because he died and was raised, those who give their lives away like him will be rescued from death like him; and if rescued then sent back into a death-dealing world to remember and proclaim Christ.

The sacrament of communion is not just an anniversary meal or excuse for a love feast turned blowout party as it was in Corinth. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the primary reminder and call to action that renews and refocuses the church for its work in a dangerous world.

Petty divisions and social posturing are overshadowed by the cross; the business of the church requires a healthy, harmonious body of believers.

John Calvin said the celebration of the Lord's Supper is appropriate every time the community gathers for worship. It is the proclamation and pledge not just of the preacher but all who partake at the table to be as generous and extravagant with their lives as Jesus was with his. That we celebrate this supper tonight, on the eve of his death realigns us with the cross and emboldens us with resurrection for the work of peace and justice in our time.

Not surprisingly the sacrament has been abused over the centuries. It has been regarded as a magical ritual that brings good luck and it has been made to seem so removed and holy that some churches observe it only once a year.

You know the old story about the origin of the words “hocus pocus” – they refer to the Latin “Hoc est corpus meum” meaning “This is my body” – the words of institution that the Roman church believed turned the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Seventeenth century magicians bastardized the phrase into ‘hocus pocus’ – a sham invocation for their magic mimicking the priests who turned the wine and bread into Christ’s body and blood.

What we celebrate tonight is not magic or some removed and rare ritual, but the galvanizing force for the people of God who live in the tension between Good Friday and the final day of history.

There are varieties of theology for this sacrament – even within the Presbyterian Church, and I dare say among us tonight.

I like Calvin’s notion that the bread and wine somehow contain the real presence of Christ – *a mystical presence* – that wins the hearts of those who come to the table. There is a spirit of love and grace and healing here – especially on nights like tonight.

But whatever our theology, Paul was right, this meal is a memory and a proclamation – without which there would be no church.

All hell did break loose when Judas got up and left the table. The temple police, the trial before Pilate and the chief priests, the crowds’ demand for his death; his scourging and carrying the cross, the nails driven into his hands and side and feet. Hell reared up when he seemed most vulnerable, like when he entered the wilderness and Satan appeared; the forces of darkness did their worst; but this supper in an upper room in a quiet moment before the chaos established their lifeline to the power of life in the days to come.

On the road to Emmaus, at the seaside, in countless gatherings large and small they remembered and proclaimed who he was, what he said and how he was raised from the tomb; and that it was now their turn to expose and defeat the same forces of darkness.

So may it be for us in these dangerous and challenging times for his church. Amen.