

April 14, 2022. Maundy Thursday

Transforming Existence

1 Corinthians 11:17-26

Our scripture today is the earliest written account of Jesus' last supper with his disciples – from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. Paul wrote this account as much as twenty years before any of the gospels were written down, as a corrective to the church at Corinth. We read 1 Corinthians 11, verses 17-26:

¹⁷Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²²What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' ²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

You could say that Communion – the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper – was the earliest Christian ritual. Sure, baptism came first, but that was borrowed from John the Baptist, who adopted it from various practices of Judaism, so this one is the first that is just for us. And it was adopted right away, it seems. The Book of Acts describes the earliest gatherings of the church as all having to do with sharing the meal together. Indeed, some of the earliest charges leveled at Christians by their enemies had to do with their “cannibalistic rites.” And we Christians even seem to have settled right away on a set liturgy for this ritual. As I noted above, Paul wrote these words some fifteen or twenty years before the gospels were written, but when they were, we find them using almost identical language. As if it were a memorized ritual, you know?

But why? Why did we so quickly develop this ritual? What is the point of having rituals at all? Because we all do. Every religion in history has had rituals associated with their most sacred beliefs. For some reason, we express in ritual things that we feel are too holy to express in everyday terms. The anthropologist Mircea Eliade wrote that the first hint of “religious consciousness” in a society is the sense that some places are more sacred than others and should be treated with special reverence. This feeling of sacred place is quickly followed by a sense of sacred time (religious festivals) and by sacred action (ritual). From an anthropological perspective, the purpose of a ritual is similar to the purpose of the holy shrine and the holy day: to separate this action from the ordinary.

That seems to be the case with Communion, because that's *exactly* what Paul complains about in the reading from 1 Corinthians. People in the church in Corinth were showing up for the

Lord's Supper and treating it like any other meal: pushing in front of the line, snatching at the best pieces of meat, taking seconds on the wine, getting a bit tipsy, and so on. "Come on, people!" Paul snaps. "You want to stuff yourself, do it at home. This meal is different. This meal is part of the kingdom of God, so your priority should be to make sure *everyone* is fed." At that point, just to make sure they remember how holy this meal is, he repeats the liturgical "words of institution" that Jesus spoke at that last supper with his disciples and friends.

At this point, though, to be fair, we should admit that there's a downside to ritual. Paul was concerned about people being careless with the Supper. Well, how do you prevent that from happening? You make rules. You settle on the exact words that must be said, as the church apparently did, and then you establish the right times for the ritual. Most of all, you decide who should lead it. *That's* how to protect the integrity of the ritual: make sure that only trained and approved personnel are permitted to lead it. But then, of course, you have to figure out how to train them and who credentials them, and you can already see where this is going. Rules breed like rabbits. Moreover, where there are rules, there are arguments about rules, and the rules concerning communion and baptism have been a source of theological dispute ever since Paul. Often utterly absurd disputes, too. After the Reformation, the three great "magisterial" reformers – Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli – met to see if they could join forces and create a united front against the attacks of the Roman church. They couldn't because none of them would bend on *their* understanding of Communion. And it's still going on. Many of you have read about the priest in Arizona who, for much of his ministry, was saying – *gasp!* – "*We* baptize you" instead of "*I* baptize you" when he did baptisms. Well! Of all things! His superiors have determined that all those plural baptisms are invalid and have sentenced him to go around re-doing them all, wearing a name tag that says, "Hello, my name is Father So-and-So, and my pronouns are I / me." So, yeah, rules can backfire, and when they become important for their own sake, they become absurd.

Furthermore, that great plan to have specialized personnel can backfire, too. Anytime you give people exclusive authority to do something, you get stuffed shirts who become fiercely protective of their privilege. In our own religious tradition, Methodism, only I am permitted to say the "words of institution" in the Communion liturgy. That's the bit that starts, "On the night when Jesus gave himself up for us . . ." and ends ". . . as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." Other people can say the other bits, but only those of us with the right certificate can say *those* words. How does that make sense? What would happen if someone else said that part? Would the Communion *not work*? It's for reasons like this that the word "ritual" has come to have a negative connotation for many people.

And yet ritual is powerful. So tonight, as we look back at the founding of the Lord's Supper on Jesus' last night of human life, I'd like to suggest a new way to look at ritual. Remember that Paul was concerned about maintaining a distinction between the sacred meal and ordinary meals at home. A meal in the presence of Christ should be treated more reverently than that. But what if the reason that Jesus established this ritual meal – a conscious, intentional remembrance of his body and blood – was not just to create a separate, holy experience apart from the world? What if his purpose was to teach us how to eat with reverence, mindful of the God who became flesh and blood alongside us, so that we could begin to bring that same reverence to *all* our meals? When Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, *as often as you drink it*, in remembrance of me," did he mean "as often as you gather for a special ritual" or did he mean "every time you take a drink"? If it's the latter, that means that the

ritual is a temporary thing: given to us for a while as a tutor and reminder until we reach the point where all meals are sacred meals. At that point, the ritual would become irrelevant; we wouldn't need it anymore.

This idea isn't completely off the wall. There are other places in scripture that suggest a similar pattern. In the years after the exile to Babylon, when Israel had had the experience of having all their rituals and holy places taken away from them, the prophet Zechariah has this vision of a different sort of future. I'm reading Zechariah 14:20-21.

²⁰ On that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, 'Holy to the Lord.' And the cooking-pots in the house of the Lord shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar; ²¹and every cooking-pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice. And there shall no longer be merchants in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

In Zechariah's vision, when the kingdom of God is finally established, we will no longer have to distinguish between what's holy and what isn't, because even our day-to-day cookware will be holy to the Lord. One more example, from the concluding vision of the Book of Revelation, the vision of the New Jerusalem in chapter 21, verses 22-25:

²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.

In the Kingdom of God, apparently, there will be no need for sacred spaces, because all spaces will be holy.

I've been thinking this Holy Week (which is, of course, one of our sacred times) about the transformations that Christ came to bring to earth. This one is huge. I'm suggesting that Christ came to make all our lives sacred, to transform mere existence into a glorious life. Thoreau famously said, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." I'm not sure that's completely true. Not everyone is quiet. But he nailed the desperation part. Jesus came to change that. I'm suggesting that our holy places, holy days, and holy rituals are here to transform that desperate, repetitive, empty existence into one that is lived in constant awareness of the Holy. This ritual that Jesus established is to be something of an appetizer, a time to have the simplest, most basic experience of mortal life, eating and drinking, in the presence of the Sacred, so that we can take that experience back out into the desperation with us. We bow in reverence before this meal, so that as we go, still trailing clouds of glory, we can join Christ's great transformative work in the world.