

“Searching for Reality” Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16 and John 6: 30-35

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This morning, in the context of celebrating the Holy Communion, I want to share with you some thoughts about what I choose to call “Searching for Reality.” Typically, I believe we tend to view a Communion Service as something other-worldly and too idealistic to be seen as ordinary or “down-to-earth.” Today, it is my hope that we can move our understanding of Holy Communion from what is often perceived as myth to a clearer understanding of reality.

The tendency to look past the ordinary and the familiar in a search for reality is not new or unusual. Many years ago, an architect at the University of Goettingen in Germany, pointed with great pride to his proposals for a vast complex of modern buildings to house this ancient center of learning. (Quote) “We have exciting plans for all of the schools except theology,” he said. “They’ll never discover anything earth-shaking.”

An attorney who is a member of one of our churches in Miami, Florida, openly admits to a similar cynicism in describing the Communion Service. According to him, (and I quote) “It is difficult for me to experience the powerful response apparently aroused in many people celebrating this Sacrament. I believe it is true that few people expect to find anything out of the ordinary in Christian worship or Christian theology. And often the last place many think to search for reality is in the life of the church and its worship.” (close quote) I’m sure this man’s honest doubts and questions can be multiplied many times by other persons who have difficulty experiencing the realities that lie behind the symbols. This, then, is my purpose today – to relate our search for reality to our personal experience as we receive this Sacrament.

I think our new United Church of Christ Lord’s Day Service offers an excellent and significant step forward in understanding the meaning and importance of Holy Communion. However, there is one line in an earlier Communion Service that, regretfully, was not included in our new service. And, because I believe this line is vital to our understanding of the meaning of this sacrament, I share it here: “We have to do here not with signs merely, but with the realities which these signs represent.” I believe that understanding and internalizing this truth is essential to full participation in this sacrament. “We have to here not with signs merely, but with the realities which these signs represent.” The signs or visible symbols are the bread and the wine. The realities which these signs represent are: First, the reality of our human limitations, and Second, The reality of how God deals with our limitations.

First, let’s take a look at our human limitations. Recognition of limitations is never an easy pill for us to swallow because the first thing we need is to set aside our human pride. When I think of pride, I remember the familiar words of a British poet, William Ernest Henley:

“Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my soul.”

Henley’s words can easily be characterized as the epitome of human pride.

I doubt not that pride accounts for more than a little of the difficulty we experience in accepting and understanding the significance of the bread and the wine. Pride certainly is not a new problem, nor is it a problem which is ever likely to end. Pride is the Pandora’s box of all humanity. Pride closes the mind when it should be open. Pride locks up the human heart when it should be free. Pride destroys human relationships that are meant to be creative. Pride builds barriers between people. Pride pits person against person, class against class, race against race, nation against nation. Pride builds idols that lead us away from God. Pride is the one word definition of Original Sin. Pride was the devil in the biblical Adam that led Adam to disobey God. Pride’s opposite, humility, was that power in Christ that enabled him to give himself so that we could be reunited with God. The bread and the wine are, in fact, symbols of God’s power to do for us what we are unable to do for ourselves.

Our human limitations remind me of a story that grows out of French history, but that relates to our search for reality. Charles Maurice Talleyrand was a French priest who became a leading diplomat in the 19th century. One day he was approached by a young man who was deeply concerned about his inability to begin a new religion which he believed would be an improvement on Christianity. The young man explained that he and his supporters were unable to make any progress in their efforts and asked for Talleyrand’s advice about what to do. Talleyrand replied that, “It is indeed difficult to begin a new religion, more difficult than can be imagined, so difficult that I hardly know what to advise.” ‘Still,’ he said – after a moment’s reflection, ‘there is one plan which you might at least try. I should recommend you to be crucified and to rise again on the third day.’”

The bread and the wine are the symbols of God’s love and God’s power to make certain that our lives do not end at the grave. For this reason I think it would be entirely appropriate and important to celebrate the Sacrament at every funeral service to affirm the new life God promises to those who believe. We should do all we can to make certain that our human limitations do not set a limit on the totality of God’s love and power.

A second reality that is brought to light in the Sacrament of Holy Communion is that God’s love is made visible as well as verbal. God doesn’t just talk a good game; God fulfills words with action. On that night when Jesus was betrayed, he sat down with his disciples to share what he knew would be a final meal. At that special time he established the bread as the symbol of his body and the wine as the symbol of his blood. He selected two common and easily recognizable symbols which each of us can identify and experience. The only possibility that remains open for these symbols to be inauthentic is for Christ himself to be a phony. If we should choose to discard the symbols of bread and wine, then we should also have to discard the cross, the resurrection, the scriptures, all historical reference to Christ, and, ultimately, God as well. We do, of course, have the freedom given to us by God to make these choices. As Thomas Aquinas so clearly states the case for our freedom to choose: “There is no person God does not wish to be saved; but there is no person God will save against that person’s will.”

The bread and the wine are the visible symbols of God’s love for us. They are God’s idea, not ours. God offers them to us; God gives them to us; God makes unlimited love known and knowable through them for our sake. God is the reality on whom the entire event depends. Of

course, we cannot, with our finite, limited minds, experience the full meaning of God's actions. Truth on this scale is too vast an ocean to be contained in the small bowl of the human mind. The truth we do possess and are able to experience is a humble, miniscule piece of reality. It is no more, in fact, than a reflection of the realities all around us. We do not create truth; we discover it. We discover what is real by responding to it and by participating in it. As we participate in truth, we experience it for ourselves, and that personal experience leads to belief. We discover a small part of the reality of God's love by receiving the bread and the wine as symbols of hope for all of us. We all have doubtless heard the classic definition of the word "sacrament" – "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." But the grace symbolized by the sacrament is not our grace. It is God's grace. It is a sign, not of our intentions toward God, but of God's intentions for us. It is God who initiates love by coming to us. Our action is to respond in faith and in gratitude. We respond by accepting God's grace as we participate in this sacred meal.

Just one more question: "Do we really need these symbols?" Think about it. Symbols are a very basic, central part of our lives. Symbols are involved in everything we experience. A wedding ring is a symbol. A driver's license is a symbol. A birth certificate is a symbol. A hug and a kiss are symbols. An invitation to dinner is a symbol. A diploma is a symbol. A street address is a symbol. How we clothe our bodies when we get out of bed in the morning is a symbol. What is there that we have or do that does not have some symbolic meaning? Symbols are how we communicate with each other and with God, and symbols are what God uses to communicate with us.

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