

Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017, I Corinthians 11:23-26, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

“For I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when we was betrayed took a loaf of bread.”

This is the night. The night of our Lord’s betrayal. The night which sets into final, swift motion the terrible events leading to a rump trial on trumped on charges, a hasty sentence and cruel execution. Within the next day Jesus will be hanging on a cross, suffering a painful death and breathing his last. But tonight, the night of his betrayal, we gather to remember that final meal at the center of which stands a loaf of bread and a cup of wine shared among Jesus and his friends.

The story when it is read on this side of the resurrection sounds simply like Jesus knew he was going to die and he was giving his friends instructions on how to remember him after he was gone. Think about this. The disciples didn’t know Jesus was going to rise from the dead. But they probably knew a crisis was mounting, a crisis of such great intensity that Jesus’ death was not an unexpected outcome. Without the resurrection Jesus’ words sound eerily sad, “When you gather again after I’m gone,” he seems to be saying, “take a loaf of bread and break it, remembering how they broke my body. And take a cup of wine and remember how my blood was spilled. Your memories of me will help keep the promises we made to one another alive after I’m gone.”

In much the same way old comrades in arms, or life-long friends will encourage one another to gather together and toast the ones who had died.

“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We will remember them.”

In his letter to the Corinthian church Paul recounts the beginning of a tradition. He says he personally received this tradition from the Lord. Paul speaks as though he was there, but of course we know he wasn’t. Paul was not a member of that original band of twelve in that upper room on the night of Jesus’ betrayal. So Paul either received this tradition from one who was actually there or he received it as a unique revelation from the risen Christ directly. In either case Paul says the tradition comes from Jesus himself. He then passes it on to the Corinthian community of Christians. Divisions, and infighting, and group rivalries threaten to split the Corinthian church. The main division split the “have’s” from the “have not’s.” The division manifested itself most visibly when the whole congregation gathered for the Lord’s Supper. Then, in these earliest days of the church, Holy Communion took more of the form of a sacred fellowship meal. Think pot luck supper along with scripture readings, sermon, prayers and the remembrance of Jesus’ last meal. The rich would bring sumptuous and plentiful dishes of food, but the poor brought only from their meagre table at home. And when they gathered together as church the rich kept to themselves and shared among themselves, and the poor had very little to eat. Paul rails against this abomination against the true nature of Jesus’ meal with his disciples. A meal in which one loaf of bread and one cup of wine is to be shared among the many, equally, without heeding the human distinctions of rich and poor and the social status we often assign to differences in wealth. In God’s eyes these are not distinctions at all.

The tradition comes not from Paul, nor any human authority, but from the Lord. To say “Jesus is Lord” is itself a statement of faith. Making this radical claim is what got Jesus put on

trial and executed. It's first and foremost a declaration of political and social insurrection. God is the Lord. All Jews acknowledge this truth. Caesar the King is Lord. All Romans acknowledge this truth. But to say "Jesus is Lord" is a one way ticket to either being thrown out of the synagogue on charges of heresy or marched into a Roman trial on the charges of treason. Paul himself suffers imprisonment several times in his life for making just this very confession that Jesus is the Lord. Paul repeats what other apostles tell us with remarkable consistency; that on this last night of Jesus' life before he died he gathered with his disciples for a final meal together. During the course of the evening Jesus took up a loaf of bread, gave thanks to God for it, broke it and gave it to his disciples, calling this broken loaf his body. And then he took a cup of wine after the supper was ended and gave it to them to drink from it, calling it the new covenant in his blood.

It's Paul who adds to this tradition: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

We are all familiar with symbolic actions and how they point to a reality beyond the action itself. Standing and facing the flag of the United States, placing your right hand over your heart and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance is a symbolic act pointing to the deeper reality of one's loyalty as an American citizen. In some ways it doesn't matter if the pledge is mumbled by a bored eighth grader who's more interested in what he's going to have for lunch in a couple of hours or the immigrant or refugee who is pledging their loyalty to their new country as a new United States citizen for the very first time. They are both citizens of this land, with the same rights and responsibilities of every citizen. And yet, who isn't stirred with feelings of joy and pride when we see a new citizen recite the pledge for the very first time? What a marvelous example for the rest of the world to see.

In the same way, at each Holy Communion, as we take bread and cup, eating and drinking and remembering the life of Jesus we proclaim his death and resurrection until he will come again. Are we bored? Are we faithful? Are we eager to receive? Are we distracted by the events of the day or what's going to be happening tomorrow? Would others, looking on, be inspired or stirred by our faith and devotion?

I don't know. But I do know this. Gathering around this simple meal of bread in wine, in Jesus' name, remembering his death and his resurrection is a public act. Your faith is on display and by joining in you are publicly declaring that Jesus is the Lord, and all other lords are but empty idols. The world will note what we do here. Sometimes in wonder. Sometimes in hostility. Sometimes in joy. Sometimes in anger.

Above all, what truly matters is Jesus meets us here. We do more than gather together to toast an absent comrade. We take into our hands, into our mouths, into our very selves the Body and Blood of his risen self. We receive the forgiveness we long for, the life we need, the promise of salvation and grace from the living Jesus. We proclaim with our remembering, with our eating and drinking, with our whole lives that Jesus is Lord. Amen.