

“Christ Is All and in All”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, July 31, 2016
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Luke 12:13-21 and Colossians 3:1-11

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Luke 12:13-21

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ, in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things--anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Colossians 3:1-11

Let us pray. Gracious God, we pray for the peace of your Spirit to continue to reside among us and within us. In the beauty of this morning, the beauty of the music, the prayers, the words that we have heard read, may what you have laid upon my heart this day be beautiful in the sight of the faithful, but only by the power of your Spirit, transforming these words into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ, the word of goodness and grace and mercy and love and welcome and forgiveness and freedom and justice. And may each of us hear the word we need in this day, at this time. In Christ’s name. Amen.

Soon I will take in my hand this bread and this cup and I will say at the end of a long litany of the table, “This is the Supper of the Lord. All are welcome.” With this simple phrase, “all are welcome” proclaimed at the end of the litany of the table each time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we break the rules of the Presbyterian Church and the reformed tradition in which we stand. While we at First Kirkwood welcome everyone who hungers and thirsts for God’s love to come forward and receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation, our sisters and brothers throughout the ages and around the globe restrict the sacrament only to those who have been baptized into the faith of Jesus Christ. For thousands of years, only those baptized have been allowed to participate in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Only those who have

died with Christ and risen to new life, only those who have been baptized are worthy of partaking of the Lord's Supper.

Yet Karen and I, over the last many years in conversations with Bill and with members of the Worship, Music and Arts Committee, have intentionally decided to break this rule of our reformed faith by intentionally inviting everyone to come to the table and be fed. We have decided against the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestants that grew out of it, that all sinners are welcomed and saved by grace prior to their putting to death their old way of life and being clothed with a new self, as Paul says. If we were literalists and fundamentally interpreted the words of scripture that I read today, that we must put to death whatever in us is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, and we must get rid of all anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language from our mouths, then none of us would ever get up out of our pew and take one step forward to grab a piece of bread and dip it into the cup that we share. Who among us has crucified all of our faults, to the point that we feel pure enough and therefore worthy to come forward to share this bread and this cup?

Karen and I, through our learning, reading, praying and conversations, believe that like so many other things the practices of yesteryear's church are sometimes, not always, rarely, but in this case they are unfaithful to the embodiment of the Gospel each of us feel called to proclaim to you. If Jesus himself gathered with tax collectors and sinners and all manner of outcasts from respectable society to eat and drink in order to let those people know that they had a place at God's table and in God's heart, then why should we place any requirement upon anyone who comes to share with us in this sacrament of gracious inclusion that has the power to change who we are and how we live in and view the world. Rather than feeling as if we are never good enough, or as if we need to pretend we're better than we actually are, by opening this table to all sinners regardless of whether we've been baptized or not, we embody the love Jesus had for those he ate with during his ministry on earth and we continue to embody his love for all who are hungry for loving acceptance this day.

You may notice over the course of the next year that we will be incorporating new words into the litany of the table. We will intentionally expand our understanding of what it means when we gather together here and share this bread and this cup. We will be looking beyond the judicial model that we have inherited of salvation, where the atoning sacrifice of Jesus is the only basis for what we do here at this meal. We will incorporate other Bible-based models of salvation or wholeness, models that emerge out of John 6 and the feeding of the five thousand, or out of John 21 with the breakfast on the beach after Jesus' resurrection. We will also look to the journey to Emmaus in Luke 24 when Jesus was made known to two travelers through the breaking of bread. We will look to the Syrophenician woman who begs to eat the crumbs that fall off the table, to the prodigal son who returns to a banquet of reconciliation and restoration, and to the strangers out in the street who were invited to attend a wedding reception when none of the invited guests have time to attend. All of these model ways of wholeness restore people in the lives that they are invited to live by inviting them to participate in a simple meal without concern for their religious credentials or righteousness. All of these experiences of 'eating with Jesus' can become a basis for broadening our understanding of what we do each time we participate in the Lord's Supper.

Please, before you call the ecclesiastical police and report us, know that the General Assembly of the PC(USA) will be forwarding an overture to all presbyteries to amend our Book of Order precisely along the lines of what we here have put into practice in our own church. The entire denomination will have the opportunity to tear down the fence of baptismal exclusivity when it comes to who is supposed to experience God's welcoming love through the Lord's Supper.

Imagine being asked, as you stand before the communion server today:
Have you put to death everything that is earthly within you?
Have you displaced all anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language from your life?

Have you stopped lying?

Honestly, have you stopped altering the truth just a little bit to protect yourself?

Have you stopped trying to blame others first sometimes?

Are you immediately able to stop yourself from saying or doing something that hurts others?

What if only you could answer “yes” to everyone of those questions, would you be deemed worthy enough to take this bread and drink this cup? Only after you have completely cleaned yourself up would you be able to come forward and have a place at this table with the faithful. If I had to honestly answer questions like that, I know that I would not be able to stand and take this bread and this cup. I would never be worthy of the Lord’s Supper.

But what if rather than seeing the taking of communion as a reward for a perfectly amended life, we begin to see it as the means, as a way, of amending our life? What if rather than needing to ‘put to death whatever is earthly’ within us before we come to this sacrament, participation in this meal is the way we are reminded and invited to act like people who are graciously part of a fellowship that none of us truly deserve to belong to, yet we have found ourselves here at this table, welcomed? What if it is through participation in this sacrament that we are continually encouraged to amend our way of living in the world? What if this is a model for how we are supposed to live our lives, to be welcoming to strangers, to live gently with those we once thought as different from us; to be thankful that we are included in this special relationship of grace and love and to continually be offered forgiveness as we learn to be forgiving?

What if participation in the Lord’s Supper is the way we are reminded to continue growing in the renewal of our minds and amending the ways in which we live? What if it is at this table that we realize, possibly for the first time, that no one deserves to be here? No one has earned the right or their place. And yet everyone is welcomed and fed and forgiven and renewed--again and again and again and again!

And most importantly of all, what if, through this sacrament someone who has struggled with and wondered if God loves them enough to care and accept them for who they are and welcomed them into a loving community of faith comes to realize that they are loved and cared for and accepted and welcomed and then they say “yes” to faith and seek to be baptized?

Here’s the story of one such woman named Sara Miles. Raised as an atheist, she lived an enthusiastic secular life as a restaurant cook and a writer. Then early one morning for no earthly reason, she wandered into a church. She said, “I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian, or as I thought it rather less politely ‘a religious nut.’” But she ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine and found herself radically transformed. About that experience she writes, “One early, cloudy morning when I was 46, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans--except that up until that moment I’d led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything.

“Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I’d scorned and work I’d never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all, but actual food--indeed the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized what I’d been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people.

“And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I’d experienced. I started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruits and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where I’d first received the body of Christ. I organized new pantries all over my city to provide hundreds and hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week. Without committees or meetings or even an official telephone number, I recruited scores of volunteers and

raised hundreds of thousands of dollars.”¹

I can only imagine the tears in Jesus’ eyes and the hunger in too many stomachs if someone denied Sara the bread and the wine saying, “Oh, I’m sorry, you must be baptized first.” Amen.

1 From http://saramiles.net/books/take_this_bread