

“Bread-of-Life Presence”

The UCC and the Lord’s Supper

John 6:35, 41-51

April 6, 2008

Those of you who have been a member of a church more liturgical than this one, or happen to have visited such a church on a Communion Sunday know well that there are wide variations in the way that the reenactment of the Lord’s Supper is approached and practiced. In some churches, for example, it is seen as so sacrosanct, so inviolable, so hallowed that the bread and wine are only allowed to be dispensed at the church’s altar by an ordained clergy person. More than that, some church denominations restrict Communion only to church members who are in good standing.

As you probably know, the belief of some Christians is that the wine actually, mystically turns into the literal blood of Jesus at the moment one partakes of it at the altar. Some of those see the wine as having thus become so holy that they give only the bread to the church members while the clergy drinks the wine on behalf of the non-clergy membership.

Quite a few years ago a person from one of the more formal traditions was present for one of our communion services here. He was less than impressed with what he considered to be our much-too-casual approach to (as he always referred to it) “the holy sacrament.”

After the service he said to one of our deacons (the woman who happened to have been the one brining the trays of bread and wine to the pew where he had been seated), “Well, that was the first time I’ve ever received the holy sacrament from a waitress.”

So yes, The Lord’s Supper, Communion, the Eucharist, the Holy Sacrament (however it is described) -- has quite a variety of meanings and forms. Depending on your church background, some of you could be thinking, “Leave it to those casual UCC’ers. They’re too laid back to bother to go to the altar, so they arrange to have Communion brought to them. Or worse yet, perhaps you guessed that the bread and cup are passed to people in the pews in order to get the service over with more quickly so that the UCC’ers can beat the Lutherans, the Catholics, and the Episcopalians to the restaurants for after -- church brunch.

Actually though, satisfying as it may be to beat the Lutherans, the Catholics and the Episcopalians to Rosemary’s or New Happy or Perkins, there is a more substantial reason for our passing the bread and cup among us rather than our each being given it only by the clergy. It is rooted in our UCC tradition and harks back to early Congregationalism.

It has to do with our conviction that not just ordained clergy but all of us – the whole congregation -- are all ministers of God’s presence and grace. In Protestant Reformation theology it was called “the priesthood of all believers.” It is further the belief that the most

common way in which God touches us, speaks to us, moves us, nourishes our spirits, is through each other. The people of the congregation are then the center of our communion service, not the clergy or the tradition or the bread and cup itself.

In fact, the remembering that is part of observing the sacrament of communion is not only a recollection of a moving incident that took place one evening in Jerusalem twenty centuries ago. It is also remembering in the sense of our being reminded of an alerted to all of the other holy, Godly, spiritually nourishing sacramental moments that are constantly given and received among us in so many different ways and situations.

If we look back at that last evening of Jesus with his disciples in the upper room, as he distributes the bread and the wine, he says (loosely interpreted) “You have become a part of me and I of you, just as this bread and wine becomes a part of us as we partake of it. My life is being poured out for you guys and each of you, matter how it feels right now, is profoundly worth it.” And as they looked back on that event, one might say that they no longer just LOOKED at each other. Remembering what had been Jesus’ patient, inclusive, lovingness toward all of them that evening, they were able to see past the quirks, behind each other’s facades, to glimpse what Jesus had treasured about each of them. They became a “bread-of-life presence for each other. It is what might be called, “the miracle of second sight.” It is available to anyone who really goes after it. And it makes all the difference in the world as to our perception and our personal effectiveness in our human surroundings.

It requires, for example, learning to listen not only to what the other person is saying, but to listen to what they are feeling. That takes practice but it can be done.

It requires scrupulously NOT making up one’s mind as to what is the truth about him or her – not doing so because you know you can never get it right – no one can. There’s always more and something other than you think.

It entails keeping in place the understanding that whatever is odd or irritating or problematic or weak about another person, it never accounts for more than one or two percent of who and what in totality he is.

It means always operating with the knowledge that for the most part, you and I don’t see others as THEY are. We see them as WE are.

That about us that we each have the capacity to give to each other is a kind of caring, for example, or lifting or reassuring is peculiar to each of us and unlike what anyone else has to give. THAT’S what makes it sacramental.

Each one of us brings to the table, the ability to understand a particular nuance of fear, maybe, or a recognition of what is triggering agony in the soul of another, or sensing

intuitively where some of his despair is coming from. There too, the giving and receiving are deeply sacramental.

As part of your make-up, a brand of compassion has evolved, or maybe it is a “quieting” manner, or a unique recipe for comfort that comes naturally to you. But when you give it, when it arrives where it is needed as a gift of God’s grace, things don’t get any more sacramental than that.

That’s why then, at its best, our passing the bread and the cup from person to person is an acted-out parable of the inextricable sacred interdependence with which God has placed us here to nourish each other.

I have an image for it that might stick better than any further generalizing. It was an obscure incident from early in World War II. An elderly American missionary was one of those rounded up on a Pacific island. Because of his age he was somewhat feeble.

He and a substantial group of other prisoners were being marched for many miles from one prisoner stockade to another. It was a cold day. No food was given them. He could feel the last of his strength and morale draining away. He became certain that he wasn’t going to survive the march.

Among those herding them along the road was a young guard – an islander recruited by the Japanese – who seemed to know some English. The elderly missionary risked begging him to allow him to drop out of line and die in peace in the ditch.

The brusque reply from the guard was “Walk on.” He did, but as it became still more difficult for him he asked again to be allowed to collapse in the ditch and die. The guard again said only, “Walk on.” Now his walking had become little more than stagger. The third time he asked, the guard, after making the same reply, whispered, “We are coming close to where my grandmother lives.” The elderly missionary stumbled on in bewilderment, wondering what kind of answer that was.

Shortly the bedraggled group was ordered to halt. As everyone rested, that English-speaking guard slipped away into a small house right along the road. When he returned, the missionary saw that he seemed to have something in his hand. He came over and asked the missionary to hold out his bound hands. Then slipping his hands inside the hands of the old man, he left there a warm potato.

Bending close as he did so, this ostensibly cold-hearted guard, quietly but deliberately spoke two familiar words – words of Jesus that have, for centuries, been part of services of communion at the point that the bread is offered. Looking deeply into the old missionary’s

eyes, he said, “Take, eat.” Then stepping back into his demeanor as guard he commanded, “Walk on!”

The elderly missionary survived the march, “less,” he later said, “because of the nourishment from the warm potato than from the surprising nourishment of his spirit. That sacramental moment – that enactment by a “closet Christian” of a holy moment of “communion” between them, became the very presence and grace of God – God’s presence in the flesh.

So make no mistake about it, God’s love, God’s inspiration, God’s caring, God’s forgiveness (and all else that is sacramental about God reaching out to us) aren’t just mystical rituals franchised to ministers and churches to be dispersed exclusively at altars.

We minister to each other. We become Jesus Christ to each other, with or without trays of wine and bread passed around in formal worship services, but all across the board in our living and struggling together. Not only is it sacramental, it’s at the very top of that which we each have to give.