

GATHERED ROUND THE TABLE

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Luke 22:14-20 - This is my body

John 6:48-58 - The bread of life

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 - Do this in remembrance of me

As a response to the shortage of ministers in some of the rural points in our charges within our Presbytery, Mary Ann and I have been doing a project called "Local Members Ministry." I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that I did a workshop on sacraments--communion and baptism--a few weeks ago, and that it was really quite a joy to work with a number of lay people in describing what these marvellous sacraments mean, and what it is to preside and to play that role in the life of the church. I decided, therefore, to do two sermons that are focussed on the sacraments, the baptism a couple of weeks ago and the communion today.

As I thought about how to teach people what it means to preside at communion without going into the scholarly type of presentation which we do in seminaries--reading up on the history and the breadth and the diversity, and writing papers--and to make it a much more common down to earth kind of thing that says ordinary people in the congregations can preside at the sacraments, I considered what they would need to know. The first thing is to know the mechanics of the sacrament. That's not hard; indeed, it's very simple, and simple by design. The sacraments are not intricate things; they are very, very simple things. What gives them their power is the meaning that is in the actions, that is in the words.

So I want to share a bit of that with you today by reflecting on what is really at the heart and the core of the communion service as we present it--as Mary Ann and I preside. It's the part that is called the institution narrative which is the story of the beginning, how it started out, what Jesus actually did at that last supper. There are various ways in which that part can be done. Sometimes that great prayer of thanksgiving is read back and forth between the one who is presiding and the members, and it includes the story of the beginning of communion. Then at the end of the prayer the minister breaks the bread and pours the wine. Another way, the way we usually do it, is to break the bread and to pour the wine at the same time as the story of the beginning of the sacrament is being told. Because the breaking and pouring are visual symbols, we do it without the words being printed so that people are looking up, not down. We must, therefore, memorize those words, not word for word, but to have in our minds what it is we are saying. One of the methods I use, as a kind of a pneumonic for remembering how to say the story of the institution, is to focus on four key action words. I may say them in different ways from time to time but I always use those same four action words: Jesus "took" the bread, he "blessed" it, he "broke" it, and he "gave" it to them. Four simple actions. The accounts

in the bible--as Michael [Mucz] said, repetition is good--are all the same but they also differ. They all have those same four action words, each of which has so much power and depth. When Jesus took the bread from the table it was at the end of a meal and not a ceremonial occasion. He and the disciples had just had a meal together, a supper, and there would have been the scraps, the leftovers, the stuff that's on the table like it is at the end of any meal. Jesus took some of the bread. It wasn't a fancy piece of bread; I imagine it was just some of what was left on the table. There's something important about the bread and the wine that Jesus took, and the reason is that they are ordinary. It's that they are not special. He took something that was as plain and ordinary as would be at every meal on every table. He took something that was very plain and close at hand. And, likewise, Jesus takes us, takes the disciples--the disciples that he called, that he chose. His disciples were not fancy, highly educated, people; they were ordinary people. And so there's a rootedness in the ordinariness of our sacraments.

We also talked with the people during the "Local Members Ministry" about some of the variations in the communion service. One of the variations has to do with these vessels we use, these things into which we put the wine and the bread. Most of you will remember a time when the vessels were silver. The chalice was silver, but many of us have moved to pottery. And that's not just a change in style; there's a meaning, a reason, for that change. There was a reason for the silver, too, because silver and gold have traditionally been seen as symbols of sacred presence. We have to some extent forgotten that, I think. Perhaps we have moved away from silver because silver has become a symbol of wealth, of opulence. It's us bringing our best, which is a good thing, but it turned around on us and our communion became something too ostentatious. Hence the shift to the ordinary--this is dirt, this is clay, from the ground. So in using pottery instead of silver we're using something that fits with the ordinariness, the plainness, the commonness of the bread and the wine that was just lying on the table, left over at the end of the meal. And those symbols tell all of us that we don't need to be anything more than just our plain ordinariness in order to be welcome at this table.

Jesus took the bread and the wine, then he gave thanks or he blessed it, something like that. What does it mean when we give thanks or when we bless? It's acknowledging God as the source, and because these elements are just the ordinary stuff lying on the table they become a symbol of the way in which all life is blessed--blessed from that source, from that divine source. All of life is sacred; all of life is sanctified in that way. Recently I watched a PBS program by a Wayne Dyer who talked about connecting with the source of life. He has a Christian orientation but he speaks beyond that into a universal meaning that can cross religious lines. He speaks of "source," and visually he has a white globe with him as a symbol of source. He keeps moving to it, touching it, and talking about the difference between life flowing in a blessed and meaningful way, on the one hand, and being lost in the world and stuck. That difference is being connected to the source of life. That's the centre for him. So in giving thanks, blessing the plain old bread and the wine from the table, acknowledging the one who has given this and all of life, the sacrament becomes for all of us a reconnecting with the source of life. All of life is sanctified in the blessing of the bread and the wine.

And then Jesus broke the bread in half, poured out the wine, and spoke of how his body would be broken and his blood would be poured out. And there's a way in which

we can feel something of a painfulness in that breaking, because every one of us in our lives has moments of breaking. A part of life is that we are broken. Jesus gave his life to be broken for us. And the idea of being broken is then transformed from something that we think of as negative or failure, into the fulfillment of life. The bread is broken in order to fulfill its purpose, to be shared and to be eaten. The wine is poured out in order for its purpose to be fulfilled, and we in our lives are broken in order for our purpose to be fulfilled. Jesus says our purpose is not to save and preserve our lives. Our purpose is to give our lives, to spend them, to break them open and have every last bit of them given and spent by the time we die. That is the highest possible fulfillment of life. And he was to live that, to live those words, by giving himself to be broken and to be poured out and to be given. And part of the meaning of communion is that it's not just Jesus who did that; in the partaking of the bread and the wine we join Christ. As Paul says, we are crucified with Christ. We join with Christ in that breaking and in the glorious rising. And then after he broke the bread he gave it to the disciples. There it is. Take some of this and eat it, all of you. Let this be spread and shared and served to everyone. Let it be given, let it be given away, let it be multiplied and received by everyone who will partake, everyone who would live in Christ. Let it be given.

We serve these elements. The servers will come up here in a few minutes and we'll share the elements. Then the servers will bring them out there to serve all of you. As you know, in our congregation we have extended that giving so that after the service of communion other servers take the elements to people at home and in institutions, so that the serving is extended beyond the walls of our congregation here. We are the servers, but we are not the host. Christ is the host, and I have been thinking about that more deeply of late as we raise this question about members of congregations serving the sacraments. There's an article in the January issue of *The Observer* about filling the empty pulpit (the matter of congregations without ministers is a national one) and the different creative ways in which congregations are struggling to fill the pulpits. I noticed that most of the stories in that article are about finding retired ministers or student ministers or people who are in that ministerial leadership stream.

What we are doing in the "Local Members Ministry" project is somewhat of a break with that. It's a challenge, and it's an adventure, saying that maybe we don't need there to be an ordained or licensed person, that maybe the congregation can choose someone from within its midst and say "we choose you and we authorize you to be the one to preside." I realize that churches have a sense that there should be ordained or licensed people presiding; it's almost as if people have come to feel that the ordained or licensed person is the host at the table, as if Mary Ann and I who stand here are the host. But it's important for us to remember, to remind ourselves, that Christ is the host at the table.

It used to be just ordained ministers who administered the sacraments. Then diaconal ministers were permitted to be licensed for that purpose. In Alberta and Northwest Conference the diaconal ministers are now routinely licensed to serve the sacraments. So there is a sharing of those roles that used to be more separated between the ordained and the diaconal. When Mary Ann and I first came here and had our service of covenanting during which symbols were presented--the chalice as the traditional symbol of ordination, and the bowl and towel as traditional symbols of service associated with diaconal ministry--we were very intentional about the symbolism. The chalice was

presented to me and I then handed it to Mary Ann; the towel and basin were handed to Mary Ann and she then handed them to me. So we symbolized this opening and sharing of these roles that had traditionally been more restricted.

Now we have lay pastoral ministers who are licensed to administer sacraments, and other lay people may become licensed as well. So it's just one more step to say that perhaps we could have people preside and administer the sacraments without being licensed or authorized in any way beyond that by the congregation; that the congregation itself through its own leadership would choose who would preside, because we are all merely servers. We are not the host. The host is always Christ. We need only to represent Christ. And so the sacrament is a way of opening and spreading the life that Christ gives, as openly as we possibly can in order that what is sanctified is not just what is on this table but is the whole of life. The whole of our ministry is sanctified, so that our caring ministry and our prophetic ministry all become sacramental in that sacred sense.

And so we now turn in our hymn books to sing "Eat this Bread and Never Hunger." I think the song expresses that well by joining different aspects of Jesus' ministry with the sacrament. It just goes back and forth. As we sing this I invite you to think even more broadly to all aspects of our life as a church and our ministry together, connected to this table as the centre.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor