***TAKEN FOR GRANTED***

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Texts: Isaiah 55:1-13 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-29

 Today we will celebrate the Lord’s Supper as we do each week at 8:30 and on the first Sunday of each month at 10:30 (10:00 in the summer). Today we will take the bread and the cup and eat and drink as Jesus invited us to do in remembrance of him. Every week we gather here at the Lord’s Table, sometimes with bread and cup set out in anticipation of our sharing in the holy meal, sometimes with only the Bible resting there to remind us that we are invited by Jesus who calls us to be his disciples. It is at this table, not an altar, that we gather each week, remembering Jesus’ great sacrifice of love for us and responding to his call to be a family of faith following his example.

 Three years ago at this time, we had no such opportunity to gather here in person. COVID kept us apart for our own safety, and while a handful of us still gathered here to break the bread and share the cup while we invited those who joined us online to do so from home, we could not all gather here side by side in person. Many folks expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share in the sacrament virtually from afar as some will do today, but for the first time, some folks told me, they realized how sorely they missed sharing the Lord’s Supper together. It was something they took for granted until they could not be here with brothers and sisters in Christ – breaking the bread and sharing the cup – and I wonder: now that the pandemic is over, do you take it for granted today, this invitation to the Table, this sharing in the Lord’s Supper together?

 As you heard from the portion of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that I read a moment ago, this tradition has roots in our faith that go back two thousand years, before most of you were born. The words we say and the meal we share continue a tradition handed down by Jesus and practiced by the first Christians who then passed it on to the next generation who passed it on to the next and to the next, all the way to us! But as Paul tells us, the church in Corinth was already experiencing difficulties with the sacrament just decades after Jesus’ death. They had begun to take it for granted, and the holy meal had degenerated into something less than holy. Factions had developed among them. Some of the wealthier Corinthians were arriving early to eat and drink together, so that by the time the poorer brothers and sisters arrived, there was nothing to share and some of the early arrivers were three sheets to the wind. What was intended as a holy remembrance shared by brothers and sisters in Christ, had become an exclusive social event that was dividing the people.

 In addition, Paul knew that some of those gathered at the table for that faithful observance were far less than faithful in their lives once they left the table. They took for granted Christ’s sacrifice and dared to call themselves Christians without embracing the change of life that Jesus called them to make as his disciples – a change that demanded they love their neighbors, serve those in need, and forgive those who had wronged them. They joyfully shared the bread and cup without taking seriously the demands of discipleship. And I wonder: do ***you*** take seriously the demands of discipleship when you accept this invitation to the table, this sharing in the Lord’s Supper?

 In *Slave Religion*, Albert Raboteau tells of William Humbert, a fugitive from enslavement in South Carolina who recounts how enslaved people came from vast distances to gather for Sunday worship under the auspices of the White slaver church. Each week the sermon offered the same message: God demanded obedience to masters. White deacons distributed communion to those gathered, including the enslaved people, and then they all journeyed back to their various plantations. Humbert recalls that an hour after sharing the Lord’s Supper, those same White deacons met the enslaved workers on the roads. If they had not returned to the plantation within the time allotted by their passport, the White deacon slave patrols would flog the brother members. They did so “within two hours of his administering the sacrament to him.” Humbert offers this honest judgment: “I thought that a man who would administer the sacrament to a brother church member and flog him before he got home, ought not to live.” In reflecting on this account, Melissa Florer-Bixler writes:

*I keep this picture in mind, of deacons with the cup in one hand and a whip in the other, when I encounter these words of Paul: ‘Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.*’[[1]](#endnote-1)

 It can be all too easy to point the finger at those White deacons, and say: How dare they! Or to point the finger at Russian soldiers who celebrated the Eucharist at an Orthodox church last week and then aimed drones and missiles at Ukrainian civilians, and say: How dare they! And while we might be right in doing so, we should be cautious of throwing stones at them when our own glass houses reveal our unfaithfulness or hypocrisy in coming to this table without taking seriously Christ’s call to discipleship. When you hold that cup in one hand, what are you holding in the other – if not a whip like the White deacon or a drone like the soldier then perhaps a fistful of dollars or just a fist or a judgmental finger to point at your neighbor. And I wonder: do you take seriously the demands of discipleship when you accept this invitation to the table, this sharing in the Lord’s Supper?

 We do not come to this table because we deserve to be here, because we have ***earned*** the right to come and eat this bread and drink this cup. We come because Christ invites us here knowing that we are broken and in need of mending, that we are sinners in need of redemption, that we are failing and flailing in following Christ faithfully and are fooling no one, least of all God, about our saintly status. We come because Christ says, “Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” and we are toting some two-ton loads on our hearts and minds. “Leave them here,” says Jesus. Be strengthened for the journey ahead! We come here because in the great mystery of faith, Jesus has promised to be present among us as we break the bread and share the cup in remembrance of him. It is a mystery that we cannot explain but a mystery in which we trust.

 In his memorable book, *Angela’s Ashes*, Frank McCourt writes of his experience of communion in his youth with his annoying brother Malachy:

"*At the Mass people go up to the altar and the priest puts something into their mouths. They come back to their seats with their heads down, their mouths moving. Malachy says he's hungry and he wants some, too. Dad says, Shush, that's Holy Communion, the body and blood of Our Lord.*

 *But, Dad.*

 *Shush, it's a mystery.*

*There's no use asking more questions. If you ask a question they tell you it's a mystery, you'll understand when you grow up, be a good boy, ask your mother, ask your father, for the love o' Jesus leave me alone, go out and play."[[2]](#endnote-2)*

You who are now grown up, do you indeed understand that holy mystery any more than you did as a child, or have you simply come to understand that it IS a mystery, and that some mysteries cannot be solved but can only be accepted with humility and gratitude and grace, like the bread and the cup: *This is my body. This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me!* You who are children, of whatever age, know this: Christ is really present with us at this table and neither your parents nor your grandparents nor I can fully explain it, but we believe it!

 At this table we are all equals – old and young, slave and free, queer and straight, Republican and Democrat, rich and poor, devout saint and struggling seeker alike – for we are invited here by Christ who came to break down barriers that would divide us, affirming that we all are created in the image of God, and while we are badly tarnished by sin, God loves us still – each and every one of us – while calling us to change our sinful ways! At this table, we are brothers and sisters in Christ called to love one another! And we should go from this table as brothers and sisters too, refusing to build back the barriers that divide us, and seeking instead to break them down with love. If we don’t – if we eat this bread and drink from this cup and then pick up our old grudges and sinful ways at the door on the way out, then we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves.

“A*s the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts*,” says the Lord. The invitation to this table is God’s ***way*** of saying, “Remember that I love you without end! Remember that I am with you always! Remember my great sacrifice of love for you! As you take and eat, as you take and drink, do not take this holy meal for granted, this sharing in the Lord’s Supper, but remember me! And as you go from this place to do whatever it is you do day to day, remember me. For,” says the Lord, “I remember you! I always remember you!” Amen

1. “Discerning the Body”, Melissa Florer-Bixler in *The Christian Century*: August 2023, pp.40-41 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Angela's Ashes, Frank McCourt, p.108 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)