

## ***The Work of the People***

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Mary Koon September 3, 2017

There was a problem in Corinth. In the early church, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper took place in connection with a community meal in a person's home. The "haves" of that early house church in Corinth were arriving first to the meal, perhaps they were friends with the hosts. They were bringing quantities of the best food and the nicest wine. Then they were eating and drinking before others could arrive. The poorer folks, who didn't get off work early, who didn't have servants to cook for them, were arriving to the meal later, only to find the food almost gone and their fellow church members tipsy.

1 Corinthians 11:23-28 *The Message* (MSG)

Let me go over with you again exactly what goes on in the Lord's Supper and why it is so centrally important. I received my instructions from the Master himself and passed them on to you. The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said,

This is my body, broken for you.

Do this to remember me.

After supper, he did the same thing with the cup:

This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you.

Each time you drink this cup, remember me.

What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt.

Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Master irreverently is like part of the crowd that jeered and spit on him at his death. Is that the

kind of “remembrance” you want to be part of? Examine your motives, test your heart, come to this meal in holy awe.

PRAYER: On this Labor Day, as we honor and give thanks to those who labor, who are retired from long years of work, we look at our worship as sacred work, particularly as it relates to the Lord’s Supper or communion. This was the selection of the Narrative Lectionary, and it seems appropriate, too, as we begin our program year.

The fancy name for what we participate each week in our worship service – reading scripture, praying, confessing, giving, passing the peace, baptism, communion -- is known as liturgy. The Greek meaning for liturgy is literally “the work of the people.” Back in ancient days, this “work of the people” referred to civic duty - something that was built or done for the greater good of society. Today, our worship together, our liturgy, focuses on something greater than ourselves as we gather to glorify God. Leaders, readers, musicians, ushers, greeters, preachers strive to make worship participatory, faithful and inclusive.

Our liturgy, the work of the people, is part of a beautiful, divine spiral. Week after week, we come together as God’s people to participate in the liturgy and then are sent into the world, nourished and energized to do God’s work, to be co-creators, with God, of a world where peace, justice and mercy are lived out. The idea is what we do here becomes part of who we are.

An example:

How many of you leave here and sing the hymns we sing in worship in your shower or in the car all week? I do! It’s why we are so careful to select music whose words reflect our theology.

As we are honest about our sin, and practice confessing and offering forgiveness, we go forth with the vulnerability and courage to do this in our daily lives.

As we share our tithes, our noisy offering, our time and talents here, we are more likely to be generous in our lives outside the church.

As we practice giving thanks, listening to scripture, praying for others, welcoming the stranger, making room for children, we take that to our daily lives, too.

Welcoming, reading, praying, being honest about sin and forgiveness, giving, sharing – these practices give shape and meaning to our lives. Our time together and apart forms a sort of holy rhythm.

Today we focus on the table – The Lord’s Supper -- Communion. It is Christ’s table – the place we practice hospitality, sharing, grace, hope, and forgiveness. It is also the place to practice resistance. For while the world continues to highlight divisions and espouse hatred, THIS table is open to all. In the world, a few have a lot and others very little, this table offers us the same gracious amounts and we are equal. While the world wants us to get our acts together, to keep a stiff upper lip and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, THIS table acknowledges that only that which is broken can be shared, that God’s love is poured out over all. With Christ as host and head of the table, we are unified in our humanness, our woundedness, our need. Through it all, we are accepted and beloved completely and with no strings attached. Here we are fed by bread, and juice, infused with the Spirit and are commanded to feed others. Paul tells us that it is here that Christ’s body is re-membered, with our memories, yes, but literally re-assembled and sent out. As St. Teresa of Avila writes, “Christ has no body but yours. Yours are the hands he uses to bless the world.”

We gather often around the table because Jesus tells us to, he does it himself, and because he promises to show up when we do – as we “re-member” him.

Eating and drinking are central to our faith -- Jesus basically eats his way through the gospels -- he feeds people and dines with all kinds of folks. Think of the wedding at Cana, feeding of the 5,000, the dinner at Simon's house, breaking bread on the road to Emmaus and eating fish on the beach with his disciples after he is resurrected. Jesus also told parables that included feasts and dinners – an image for the Kingdom of God. The Jewish tradition of the day was very clear about who could and could not eat together and Jesus ignored it all in favor of inclusion and wide welcome, which really ticked off religious elites of the day. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is accused of being a drunkard and a glutton, a friend to tax collectors and sinners. For Jesus, food is an essential piece of our shared life. He even says, "I am the Bread of Life." Eating with Jesus has a profound effect on people – back in Jesus' time and even now.

My friend Steven had an experience of this when he was young and it transformed his life forever. As a college student (St Paul) he was feeling lost and alone, directionless, discouraged. He wandered into a small church one Sunday night and sat in the back of the sanctuary, quietly trying to hide. When it was time for communion, Steven did not go forward to receive the elements, but stayed put. Eventually, a server came to him and asked him his name. Looking into his eyes, the server said, "Steven, this is Christ's body broken for you." At that moment, he felt loved and accepted in a way unknown to him before. And this year, Steven celebrated 30 years in ministry as a Presbyterian pastor.

And there is something about sharing a meal that is basic to who we are as human beings. Our willingness to eat together and to share the same food expresses trust, helps form our identity, and promotes our unity. The benefits of the family meal cannot be overstated. Our church understands just how important this is – there is rarely a ministry or meeting that does not have food to share. We participate in a family meal each Wednesday night, and many of us have participated in the Iftar meals during Ramadan – all offered to nurture and build community.

Social scientists at the University of Chicago even confirm that there is something special about eating together and particularly sharing the same food. They conducted an experiment that shows that people who share the same food tend to find common ground and agreement almost twice as fast as those to sit together and eat different food.

We've known through millennia that we are shaped by the food in our common meal of bread and juice. Communion reminds us that we are what we eat. When we eat Christ's body and drink in the love of Christ, we are filled and nourished by the Holy Spirit, who encourages us to the side of the weak, the lost, the vulnerable. As we eat together, we are filled with joy and anticipation of mutuality and love in the fullness of time. We then work to co-create a piece of God's kin-dom every time we fill a backpack for the Sheridan story, or tutor a child, serve at Simpson house, bake muffins for a shut-in, make soup for our freezer, or share a sandwich with someone in the school cafeteria.

I close with an old, old story that is one of my favorites. When I learned that our theme this morning was communion, this is what first came to mind.

A woman was having a conversation with God one day and said, "Lord, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like. So God led the woman to two doors.

Inside the first door was a room, and in it was a large round table. In the middle of the table was an enormous pot of stew, heaped with the bounty of the earth – and it smelled delicious.

But the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths -- so they were starving. The

woman shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. God said, "You have seen Hell."

They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was the round table with the large pot of stew heaped with the earth's bounty that smelled delicious. The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking.

"I don't understand," said the woman.

Instead of trying to bring food to their own mouths, the people are feeding each other.

Let us do the same. Thanks be to God. AMEN

AMEN