

SIGHT UNSEEN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

June 7, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 29; I Corinthians 11:17-26

I remember my first impressions of going to church on a communion Sunday as a child. For one thing we always sat behind Mr. Hoover, a very nice older gentleman, a widower whose name made me think of vacuum cleaners, and who in the days when no one worried about children receiving candy from adults always brought a Hershey bar for me to eat during the sermon. As the minister rose to the pulpit, Mr. Hoover would turn around and surreptitiously slip me the nickel candy bar in its fresh brown wrapper, and I would settle in for the extended Word of the Lord that Dr. Powell would preach.

We were Methodists in those days, and the communion table was there on the floor of the chancel, bearing the cups in trays like the ones we use, with tiny cut wedges of bread in plates. We always went up and knelt at the communion rail in the Methodist way, a very holy and mysterious thing for a child to do. But it always made me feel as if I had been made clean and fresh and new and I got to start all over again in life once I stood up. I always wondered what would happen afterwards, of course, because it was only the sins that had been committed before the communion that were covered under this insurance policy and not the ones that would take place immediately thereafter, before the next communion. Maybe I was an early Martin Luther wannabe, in those days. It is said that Luther would spend hours in confession only to rise from his knees and start to go away and remember yet another sin that had not been confessed. So he would stop and return to his knees and pray again for another hour.

I do remember the communion table of our church was covered with a large white cloth from end to end, with the trays and plates underneath it. The first time I saw it I thought there was a corpse on the table underneath the cloth, CSI style, before there was a CSI; but after the first time, I knew it was just the plates and the trays. The deacons took the cloth off the table with such precision in folding that it seemed like a military tribute at graveside, except we were in church. And you knew that what they were doing was really important, holy in fact, because they did it so carefully, and I knew that whatever was going on there with all that care, those folks thought they were standing about as close to God as you can get this side of heaven.

My mother taught me that the bread and the juice was the body and blood of Christ. And my eyes were wide open when she said that, like I had seen a ghost. Then in the way that every parent does, struggling to explain complex theological concepts beyond her pay grade, she explained that we weren't Catholic, and we didn't really believe that this was the actual body and blood of Christ, but we just pretended that it was anyway.

From a child's perspective, that sounded a lot like make-believe to me. Like it all depended on what *we* thought, or made up in *our* minds. A little like the dumb tea party

that Betty Ann Munch once invited me to share with her. There wasn't any tea, and there weren't any cookies either. We had to pretend all that. And it was a really stupid thing to do from this boy's perspective. But I did it, once, and then never did it again.

Of course, those early impressions of something holy being revered at that table, the kneeling and the wondering about the sins covered and the ones yet to be committed, the white cloth so carefully folded and draped, and even the contrast of the bread with the Hershey bar that was just a Hershey bar and didn't pretend to be anything more than that... in those observations I had all the basic theological questions in rudimentary form that we all ask when we approach this table and partake of its elements. It is after all a mystery, or as both Luther and Calvin said, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It is the hardest thing in the world to explain, except maybe the Trinity itself.

But I guess I better try because it is around this table that we come today from many differing backgrounds, including non-Presbyterian traditions and religious understandings; Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, Quaker. In any Protestant church today there is that reality of religious representation. We come from many and varied backgrounds and few people spend their life in only one denominational affiliation. So in a sense we are many faiths gathered at one table. And even some skeptics are here as well, unsure that anything reasonable is going on at this table.

Most of us know the basic differences. We talk about it in the Inquirers' Classes. In the Roman tradition, the Catholic Church teaches that Christ is actually sacrificed in the mass, present at the table, invoked by prayer, *transubstantiated*, as the church teaches, so that the wine and the bread of the chalice and paten become the actual body and blood of Christ. Which is why Jesus is still on the cross in Catholic piety, because every day, countless times, on every continent, again and again, in every hour, Jesus dies for our sin and suffers for our sake and is present in the body and blood transubstantiated at the altar.

By the mid 1500's Martin Luther came along, himself a Catholic monk, who challenged the traditional understanding of the change that takes place at the table when the bread and the wine are blessed. Luther argued that the elements do not change in substance themselves, but something happens with them, *consubstantiation*, he called it, "con" from the Latin meaning "with". The bread and the wine are not changed in molecular, cellular structure (if I may speak so literally in 21st Century terms about a 16th Century concept), but Christ is *with* the bread and wine, inseparably, and the communicant receives the body and blood of Christ in that somewhat less unique but still effective way.

John Calvin who will celebrate his 500th birthday on July 10th came along in the Mid-Sixteenth Century, influenced by his contemporary, Martin Luther, and like the good lawyer that Calvin was, had to get in what he hoped would be the last word.

Representing a compromise within the Reformed tradition, a compromise between Luther and Zwingli, Calvin said God has made an appointment with us. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup the Lord will be present, but not like make-believe, not like Betty Ann Munch's tea party dependent on *our* imagination to supply what is not really there.

The presence of God is there, said Calvin, whenever the Word is rightly preached and heard and the sacraments are rightly administered. This is the design of the Holy Spirit working through the faith of the believer, as the elements become for us the means of Christ's saving love. Christ is present by the Spirit, therefore, whenever the sacraments are received in this way.

All these years we Christians have been divided over the question of what is happening at the table. And while we have differed about *how* God is present there, we have never doubted *that* God is present there.

Why is this table so meaningful to us? Why do we try so hard to locate God, here? Because, in microcosm, it represents our desire to see God present in the world beyond this table, engaged in our struggles, knowing our lot. And this is the place, all traditions say, where that presence is reflected.

Christianity is a very tactile faith, you know. We use bread and wine and water as sacraments, tangible, tasteful elements that become the very intersection between what is seen and what is not, between what is known and what is believed.

We don't give as much thought today to the question of *how* God is at the table, certainly not in the way the early church community asked those questions. Our question is broader than that, more fundamental in fact. Our question is *whether* God is present in our world at all and where we can see the signs of that. Because we long to see God somewhere among us.

I read my morning paper and there it is writ large, the anxiety, the concern that we are adrift in life and there is no help around. Everybody's struggling to just make it these days.

A former member wrote me a letter this week. He and his wife are living away from New York and are retired but they sent a check to support the church. "We are sending something now," they said, "because we're not sure how we're going to make it for the remainder of the year. Our pension benefits have been cut in half, and our retirement savings are down 35%. We need to go into a retirement community, but right now we can't afford it." I hear the loneliness and the fear in that letter. Don't you?

Every day it seems the international page is covered with blood. Pictures of mosques being blown up, and wedding receptions being bombed, and children burned by aerial attacks from drones, and the flag draped caskets being unloaded at Dover Air Force Base. We read the names of every service person who dies each week in the church, because we believe that if they die for our sake, we who understand that language of all people, ought to take a moment to remember their names before God. We don't read

their ages... because... well... because I'm not sure any of us could get through it. They're all 25, and 24, and 19, and 32, and I just don't think we could bear that every week. Where is God in all that turmoil and warfare and heartbreak?

Several of our families right now are going through a hard time with their children facing surgery, or undergoing chemo, or dealing with some debilitating illness that a child shouldn't have to endure. My heart goes out to these families, and for sure they need the support and help of a God who will not be distant at a time like this, but rather one who will join them in the waiting room and stand by them while the chemo is administered and the hair comes out and the pain comes back. We're looking for signs of God's presence in the world. Evidence that the holy is near.

Ironically, so many books these days have been published by authors that everybody's reading, authors who are describing the absurdity of faith, the uselessness of believing in anything but the scientific method and what you can see and taste and touch and smell and deposit in the bank. God, they argue, is an old fraud, the creation of an overactive imagination. Richard Dawkins writes about **The God Delusion**. Christopher Hitchens tells us **God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything**. And Sam Harris' book has the title, **The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and The Future of Reason**. Now there's a hopeful title!

Methinks, frankly, that they all protest too much. And besides if there is no God, what is there to urge us on to anything better, to live in community, to seek after one another's welfare, to care for those who most need care, to sacrifice self in other words for the sake of another? If self-interest and independence are everything, then nothing counts for much. I've seen what there is of human nature when it is left unaccountable to God whenever I try to hail a cab in this town in the rain. It is not a pretty sight!

What I see rather than the absence of God in the world is a burning desire innate in the human spirit that is seeking after God, that desires to know the Holy, that prays as a means of being in communion with God, and longs for a love that will not let us go. From the most primitive of human expressions of animal sacrifice, to the most exquisite example of human and divine selflessness expressed in the life of Jesus, there is a desire in us to seek and to see the Holy in life, and it gnaws at us like hunger in the morning.

If it is true that we desire to see something of God in this world in which we live, then let me assure you that that desire is exceeded by one thing... God's desire to be known by us; God who seeks after us like a father who watches the horizon longing for his prodigal to come home, like a mother who nurtures her infant with her own body.

I think God is trying to be seen and recognized by us all the time, if only we will pay attention. From the growing of the plant in the crack of the rock that seeks to assert life in the least likely place, to the movement of the planets in orderly rhythm, to the delicate balance of environment and ecosystem, to the variety of creatures with whom we inhabit this earthly home, the screeching owl, the prowling bear, the soaring eagle, the inching worm; the child who takes her first breath and screams with self assertion,

announcing a beginning, affirming the wonder of life... these are all magnificent signs of God's presence, visible, near, as close as the blood in our veins, and the air in our lungs, and every bit as wondrous. What was it we were thinking... that God does not wish to be seen and known?

There is an old saying that the rhythm of the church is to gather the folks, tell the story, and break the bread. And so we gather about this table this morning, knowing that we come from many backgrounds and religious understandings. But we are united in a common desire to see God, to know the Holy, to touch something of that which can transform us.

This table is the welcome table where God seeks us out and would be known, for the sake of us who wish to know God present, even if sight unseen.

There is a story told by Fred Craddock, former professor at Emory University about his days growing up on a farm in the country in Tennessee.¹ He and his sister and brothers would play hide and seek. And you all know how that goes. Somebody is "It" and whoever is "It" hides their eyes, counts to a hundred really fast, and shouts, "Ready or not here I come." In the meantime everybody else has hidden themselves in a secret place. Then the person who's "It," comes looking and tries to beat the first one found to home base and touch the base three times saying, "You're it." Then the other person is "It."

Craddock says he loved to play this game because when his sister was "It" she counted really fast, in fact she skipped all the numbers between ten and ninety eight, ninety nine, a hundred and started looking right away. But Craddock had ingenuity on his side. He was small and there was a little crawl space under the front steps of the house where he could go right away and hide and she couldn't see him.

His sister would go looking all over the place. In the house, out of the house, in the weeds, in the trees, down to the corncrib, in the barn. But she couldn't find him.

Craddock says sometimes she'd get close and she'd be standing right beside the steps and he could see her legs and he could just barely hold in his snickering. He thought to himself, *She'll never find me here. She'll never find me here.* Then it occurred to him... she'll never find me here. So after awhile he'd stick out a toe. And when she came by, she'd see the toe and say, "Uh oh, I see you," and she'd run back and touch base three times and say, "Ha ha, you're it." And Craddock says he would come out brushing himself off and saying, "Oh shoot, you found me."

What did he want? What did he really want? The very same thing everybody in this sanctuary today wants. Not to be lost but to be found.

And I would add that from the look of things over there, even God wants to be found.

¹ I have recounted Craddock's story nearly verbatim as it appears in the anthology of his stories entitled, *Craddock Stories*. Fred B. Craddock ed. Mike Graves and Richard Ward. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001. 34.