

Holy Communion: Reminder, Opportunity and Invitation

Acts 20:7-12

Maundy Thursday, March 29, 2018

Other pastors, like myself, have no doubt heard their fair share of stories too--about “long-winded” preachers. One of my favorites is about a man, who was a first-time visitor at a church where he had never worshipped before! He MISTAKENLY THOUGHT the service began at 6:30 PM, but, in fact, it began at 6 PM. Therefore, the sermon was already in progress by the time this man arrived at the church!

He sat on the back pew and did his best to listen as intently to the sermon as he could--for the first 10 minutes. But then he tapped an older gentleman on the shoulder who was seated before him. The older gentleman turned around and the visitor leaned forward with the question: “How long has that man been preaching anyway?”

The older gentleman replied, “I can’t say for sure, but I think it is pretty close to some 40 years!”

To which the first-time visitor whispered back. “If he’s been preaching close to 40 years, I think, he should be pretty-well finished then, by now!”

I can’t tell you this for certain, but I imagine that every faithful preacher of the gospel has been accused of being a “LONG-WINDED” preacher, at times! But are you familiar with this story in 20th chapter of ACTS about the Apostle Paul--who got a little long-winded one Sunday evening too--whose sermon must have lasted for several hours?

I am referring to the passage we read as our first lesson this evening!

Here Dr. Luke informs us that St Paul was preaching an extremely long sermon; so long that he was still preaching that same sermon past midnight.

Luke doesn’t mince any words either, in his straightforward reporting of this rather strange event! Here in Acts 20, Luke writes: “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread (this means, my friends, to celebrate Holy Communion), Paul talked with them at length because he intended to depart from them on the next day--and he prolonged his speech until midnight.”

Furthermore, Luke tells us: “There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered, and a young man named Eutychus, sitting on the window sill, sank down into a deep sleep, as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell out of that third-story window and was taken up dead!

But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him into his own arms, Paul said to everyone else around them: “Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him!” And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. And they took the youth away alive and were not a little comforted.”

For some reason in his preaching of the Word of God that evening, St. Paul just talked on and on! And since the early church traditionally celebrated Holy Communion each time they were gathered together by the Holy Spirit for a public worship service, it’s likely that St. Paul’s marathon sermon was accompanied by their observance of the Lord’s Supper too--that was instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on that first Maundy Thursday--on the very night when Jesus celebrated the Passover Feast with his disciples in Jerusalem for the last time.

It was on that night that Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and said to them: “If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another’s feet! I have shown you these things as an example. Blessed are you, if you DO THEM” (John 13:12-17)!

Here St Luke tells us that these believers in the infant Church---still remained congregated together long enough to celebrate the Lord’s Supper that evening, even after that young man named Eutychus had fallen asleep during Paul’s sermon; fallen asleep and completely out of that upper room, three stories to which everyone presumed would have been to his certain death below! --- But when St. Paul flew down those stairs like greased-lightning and hugged that boy for dear life; so that by God’s own divine power, that boy’s young life was returned to him!

My brothers and sisters, just as it was for those people living in that first century world -- our celebration of the Lord’s Supper again tonight should also be a reminder to us! A reminder to us about what? A reminder

to us that HE'S ALIVE. And not simply a reminder that Eutychus was life, but that our LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST WAS ALIVE TOO--WHO HAD BEEN RAISED TO NEW LIFE THAT FIRST EASTER MORNING!

I. Holy Communion should always remind us: "He's alive!"

Going back to our text, however, this was an object lesson no one wanted. Eutychus fell asleep, and then fell to his apparent death.

Was his mother in the room? Was he married? If he was married, did he have children? When Eutychus fell out of that third-story window there was suddenly such a rush of emotions that erupted in that room!

Perhaps there was a scream. Surely there was a "thud!" People raced outside, and the long-winded preacher pushed past those who had proclaimed him dead. Miraculously, in a few moments, Paul was able to cry out, "He's alive!"

Can you hear the excited echoes? "He's alive!" "Eutychus is alive!" "He's OK!"

The real reminder of each Lord's Supper isn't of the second chance Eutychus got. The remembrance we have is of a Savior who died for us, and yet lived again.

St. Paul says it like this in I Corinthians 11:26, "Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes!"

Friends, if Jesus, who was crucified is coming again, he must have first of all, ascended into heaven! And if Jesus had ascended into heaven, he must have even, prior to all that--been raised from the dead--that first Easter morning!

Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes!"

Imagine the joy around Jerusalem, just minutes into that first Resurrection Sunday. "He's alive!" shouts Mary. "He's alive!" screams John. "He is alive," confirms Peter. "He's alive?" asks the governor. "He's alive!" screams the city. History was changed with just such a cry, and every time we take the bread, give thanks for it, pour the wine, and speak our Savior's own life-giving words over the bread and the wine--we continue the Church's cry: "He's Alive!"

II. Holy Communion is an Opportunity for Every One of us to: Be Comforted!

What a beautiful ending to tonight's sermon text! "After "breaking bread, the people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted." They'd almost lost one they loved, but now he was alive.

Our frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper are reminder to us that our Savior is alive! He comes to us with his very body broken into death on the cross for us and his blood that was shed for us!

But these words provide a great deal of comfort to us--in another powerful way too! Why? How? Because all who have partaken of this bread, and this cup as believers and yet died ... are also alive with our Savior in heaven! Is there any greater joy of knowing that the ONE YOU GRIEVE FOR ISN'T REALLY DEAD AT ALL, BUT ALIVE? What a relief, what a joy inexpressible. What a life-changing truth. Today, as you partake of THIS INCREDIBLY LIFE-GIVING MEAL--REMEMBER THE TRUTH: HE'S ALIVE!

Several times during the tenure of my ministry here at Mount Olive Lutheran Church, I can certainly remember those occasions when a son of this congregation would come home from war and return to us from such places in the Middle East, like Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iran.

For several months and sometimes, even for a year, or almost 2 years, they had served in a place of great danger; which to an American would have been in some very unfamiliar and uncomfortable surroundings.

When that soldier talked about his joy of returning home again, he talked of the simplest things. His recliner fit like a glove! His bed was nothing short of luxurious comfort! What a joy it was to be able to play ball with his son again and share a meal with the family after a Sunday morning worship service once again! The greatest comfort he knew in those moments wasn't necessarily anything all that elaborate!

The greatest comfort was simply being home. It was the comfort of having familiar surroundings after being away from home so long on a very dangerous journey.

The disciples and the close-knit circle around Jesus thought they had lost Jesus.

They had called him Messiah, and life had been wonderful when Jesus was around. Suddenly, there was the cross, and it was all over. The grave sealed their hopes, and their comfort was shattered!

But, then came the cry - "He's alive!" - and Jesus was in their midst again.

He came with open hands, standing among them, fixing them breakfast even one day on a beach; roasted fish--fishes that he had provided to them once again in an enormous catch of fish, walking with them, encouraging them, leaving them with the smiles upon their faces too, of a man come home from war.

Wherever you've been, the Lord's Supper is an opportunity to come home. The battle might have been difficult, and you might not have won every fight. But here is forgiveness, and grace ... and the open arms of home.

III. Thirdly, the Lord's Supper is an Open Invitation: Get Started!

In 1847, a boy named Homan Walsh went out to fly a kite. Homan was taking part in a kite-flying contest, so he brought his best kite, and plenty of string. There he stood on the Canadian bank of the Niagara River, letting more and more of that kite string go out, so that this boy's kite kept going higher, and higher, and higher ... until it stretched nearly 1,000 feet.

When a stranger on the American side of the Niagara Gorge grabbed Homan's string, the crowd that had gathered let up a mighty roar. For the first time in history, people on opposite sides of this great gorge were holding onto the same string. And Homan won \$5, the top prize in the contest.

There was much more than \$5 at stake, however. In short order, the string was tied to a tree on the American shoreline, and a light cord tied to the Canadian end of the string. The cord was then pulled across the 800-foot span. A rope was tied to the cord and pulled safely across. To the rope was attached a wire cable, and to the cable, a thicker cable attached. It was the beginning of an engineering victory over one of the greatest natural barriers that had separated Americans and Canadians.

Fifty-foot towers were built on each side of the river, and more cables became a part of the picture. In time, people rode across the river in buckets, for \$1 each, and then they walked on a foot bridge for a quarter. But less than a year after Homan's kite first flew across the river, people were safely riding their horse-drawn carriages across the Niagara, on a marvelous suspension bridge that hung 220 feet over the rushing water.

Eventually, there were 15 bridges that spanned the Niagara, six of which are in use today. The thousands of passengers that travel across the multi-lane, high-speed bridges today think nothing of the bridge, some of them so familiar with the path, they barely glance at the scenic view. More than likely, it has never occurred to most of those on the great bridges today that somewhere in the past, just to get this modern-day miracle under way, somebody had to fly a kite.

If great bridges can get their start with a boy's kite and string, then I'll tell you that great spiritual experiences can get their start with amazingly simple decisions.

The Lord's Supper the most profound, and yet also, paradoxically--a simple meal! To some people, it might not seem much more significant than a boy flying a kite. But God's offer to each one of us again this night is for each of us to make that connection! From the smallest beginnings can come great bridges of faith! Amen