

“Communion”
I Corinthians 11:23-29
November 4, 2018

For years, visitors to Washington, D.C., have stopped to marvel at one of the Capitol’s best-known works in stone: a huge head of Abraham Lincoln. One day, while the sculptor was hard at work on the Lincoln head, his labors were interrupted by a family who came to visit him at his studio. The face of Lincoln was just beginning to emerge on one side of the massive block of granite on the studio floor.

While the adults visited with the artist, their five-year-old daughter, dwarfed by the rock, gazed in wonder at the giant features of Lincoln’s face. After a few moments of rapt study, the little girl scurried over to the sculptor, tugged at his pants leg, and asked him, “Is that Abraham Lincoln?”

Somewhat surprised that a mere five-year-old would recognize the admittedly familiar, craggy face, a startled “Yes” came as the reply. “Well,” the little girl challenged, hands on her hips: “How did you know he was inside that piece of rock?”

Now, had that stone fallen into the hands of another master sculptor, probably someone else, or something different, would have been seen inside that block of granite. Had a mason, such as my grandfather, acquired that block of granite, it would have had a different function altogether. Or maybe if that rock had come to you or to me, we might have seen nothing there but a mass of stone, no different from what we see every day in the fields, the woods, or the open spaces of our New England countryside.

So it is with other elements of nature, including the bread and the fruit of the vine, which almost fall into our laps, so to speak. I wonder what it is that each one of us sees inside these common elements of wheat and the grape which are offered at this table? For those unconcerned with matters of the spirit, little or nothing at all will be seen beyond the surface realities. They would see nothing inside the block of granite. But for those who consider themselves followers of Christ, what is it that we discern in the bread and the cup?

That the Church has seen something profound is reflected in our scripture lesson this morning, when the Apostle warns that “he who eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks condemnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.” These are rather strong words; they must have reflected a very important experience. But there is little agreement about that experience among those of us who call ourselves Christians.

I’m not here now to recite and rehearse all the theories about what happens at the Communion table when the Lord’s Supper is shared. I’ll leave that for a Bible study class, a discussion group, Confirmation classes, or whatever. One thing about all those theories is that you might need more than a Ph.D. to understand some of them. And if that is the case, I begin to wonder if we haven’t missed the point about Jesus’ ministry of simplicity to the everyday women and men of this world.

But to get back to where I began, it all depends on what you can see inside the block of granite, or in this case, in the simple, forthright, unadorned sharing of bread and cup. Now, what I see may be different from what YOU see. But let me take advantage, for a moment, of my place here to share with you MY vision of what can be made of the Lord’s commandment to “do this in remembrance” of

him, especially in the light of those somewhat disturbing, troubling words of Paul to the Corinthians.

Each time we gather here, we say we are sharing - sharing the bread, and the fruit of the vine. But what if we don't then carry over that spirit of sharing into our own everyday lives? Wouldn't the whole communion service thus prove itself ineffectual at best, irrelevant at worst? To not be affected by the sharing at this table is to deny the presence of Christ - not just here, but in our daily existence. Christ gave of himself freely for the betterment of the lot of God's people, for the fulfillment of hopes and dreams, for the comforting of those fraught with fear, for the drying of tearful eyes, for the healing of hurts, for the celebration of Life. The bread and the cup recreate, or summarize (if you will) that sharing of His life, the sharing of His own flesh and blood.

To eat and drink in remembrance of One who gave his entire life for others, and then to deny the reality of that life in your daily living - is that not unworthy (to quote Paul)?

Perhaps you see something different. What else might we see? Well, in the common table around which we gather, we express fellowship with all those who would call Jesus "friend." But do we really live out that fellowship? Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors and taught us that all the peoples of the world are God's children. Some of them may be wayward, but God loves them all. And if we wish to be Christ-like, so should we.

Yet we consider many people to be our enemies, snubbing others because of hurt feelings or misunderstandings, ignoring people because they are poor or dirty despite being all tied together in our common humanity, which carries the divine image of God himself. Realistically, though we live in a world that is divided by

race, religions, and by economic and political differences, are we not to acknowledge that in the One who shares Himself so fully for us that there IS no East or West, or South or North?

Our fellowship is also tied together by faith, by the love of Christ, as well as by the common, basic elements of grain and fruit. I find it amazing that, genetically speaking, the wheat sown today to make this bread is virtually identical to the grain used in the time of Jesus. So it is, too, with the grape. We are bound in a fellowship not only spanning the globe, but spanning the centuries. To live in disregard of those who came before us, irreverent of their memory, and making light of their sacrifices, is to be unworthy of what happens at this table. To live as though the coming generations don't matter is, in the light of this communion table, a statement not of sharing, but of supreme selfishness.

Surely the elements we share today are things of surface simplicity that can lead us into seeing things of great wonder and depth inside. For is there not anything more basic than eating and drinking for human beings? Look at so much of the Gospels: parables of the Kingdom, the Sermon on the Mount, the ministry of Christ - eating and drinking and other basic realities were at the center of so much of what Jesus said and did. All arise out of well-known human experience, simple events opening onto a vastness of spiritual truth.

Yet all too often our lives do not allow us to see beyond the superficial blocks of granite. We are daily caught up in the complicated, tiring busy-ness of our early 21st century world. More and more, we become entangled in a clutter of nonessentials to which we devote most of our time, energy, and substance. This is the day of the experts who know more and more about less and less. Life is lived mostly on the surface, and what a web of circumstance we become tangled in.

Somewhere, somehow, we should remember that we were intended to live joyously and deeply together, instead of in emptiness, divided from one another, un-seeing, un-perceiving. The One who would lead us out of the nonessentials that are forever choking out our living would lead us back to the basic truth, to the simple realities, and to seeing that each one of us is a child of God.

For were we not all created in the divine image? Yet who sees that image today, within the block of granite out of which we chisel our lives? Within each of us lies that divine form, just as Lincoln's rested in that stone. Some of us have totally obscured our portion of the heavenly image. No one taking stock of our lives would ever suspect that God Almighty lives within us. Our rough edges are so rough! Some of our angles are so crooked!

But let me assure you - the divine is there. If you have missed it within yourself, then perhaps you can find it again in Jesus Christ, who shared his entire substance, who devoted his whole life, who loved as no One has ever loved, before or since. It is His life, His work, His message which we share in today, around this table.

Come. Let us break bread together.