

JUNE 2, 2013: BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST
Genesis 14:18-20 I Corinthians 11:23-26 Luke 9:11b-17

With the number of Eucharists being cut drastically all over the world because of the man-made priest shortage, it might be good to look at some of the first Christian concepts of that celebration.

Early followers of the risen Jesus were so committed to the Eucharist that they even found Hebrew Scripture references to it in passages which modern scholars are convinced had nothing to do with Jesus or the Christian Breaking of Bread. Today's Genesis passage provides us with a classic example of such "eisegesis." The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, for instance, especially zeroed in on two points: Melchizedek being a priest, and his offering Abraham's men bread and wine.

Yet Paul in today's I Corinthians passage - our earliest biblical reference to the Lord's Supper - stressed a completely different aspect of the Eucharistic action.

Angered by the Eucharistic behavior of some in the Corinthian community toward the poor, the Apostle does more than just remind his readers of Jesus' Last Supper words and actions. He emphatically states, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes."

Back then, the Eucharist was celebrated in the context of community meal, an event in which everyone shared their food and drink with everyone else. Some of the Corinthian well-to-do resented the fact that the poor couldn't bring anything to the meal. They seemed, for instance, to have announced to the wealthy that the Eucharist would start at 7:00, and told the poor it began at 7:30. By the time the latter arrived, little of the meal remained. Because some refused to die by sharing their food with others, the poor went hungry.

Paul was convinced that the risen Jesus became present only when the community died enough to themselves to experience him/her in everyone participating in the celebration. For Paul, not to recognize the body of Christ in one another made one unworthy to receive the Eucharist. Unlike today's theology, Jesus' presence didn't depend on having the right person say the right words over the right elements; it revolved around a commitment to be one with all who were present.

Our gospel references to the Lord's Supper also emphasize sharing.

All Scripture scholars agree that Luke's theology of the Eucharist shaped today's miraculous feeding pericope. Since Luke faithfully copies most of Mark's chapter 6 narrative, it's important to notice that his Jesus technically doesn't feed the crowd; his followers do. When the Twelve make him aware of the hunger situation, Jesus doesn't immediately take care of the problem. Instead, he tells his disciples, "Give them some food yourselves."

He quickly brushes aside their protest, "Five loaves and two fish are all we have ...," telling them to arrange the 5,000 in groups small enough to be efficiently served. Then he takes their bread and fish, says a blessing over the meager fare, and returns it to them "to set before the crowd." The people's hunger is only taken care of by Jesus' followers' willingness to share what little they have.

If we're serious about following our biblical Eucharistic theology, any modern reform of the Lord's Supper must revolve around more than just changing ceremonial words and rituals. Somehow we must create an opportunity for all to share with others. I presume Paul would have been uptight to discover that one day we'd remove the pot-luck dimension from the Breaking of Bread. He'd quickly demand we come up with something to replace it, something by which we could become one enough with those around us to make the risen Jesus present to all. Any ideas?

JUNE 9, 2013: TENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Kings 17:17-24 Galatians 1:11-19 Luke 7:11-17

One of the misconceptions many "good folk" have is that our Scriptures basically show us how to get into heaven when we die. Though at times our Christian Scriptures (and a few of the late Hebrew Scriptures) talk about eternal life, our sacred authors' main focus is on life right here and now. People of faith are expected to do more than just one day go through the pearly gates; we're expected to live our daily lives in a way that gives us life long before our physical deaths. In many ways, eternal life is just a continuation of the life we've already discovered on this earth.

That's why, for instance, the gospel Jesus resuscitates three individuals: Jarius' daughter, his friend Lazarus, and the subject of today's passage, the widow of Nain's son. If Jesus had come only to show us the way to heaven, why would he have brought people back to this life? He would have rejoiced that the dead were already eternally happy with God in heaven. As a Pharisee, the historical Jesus believed in an afterlife. But today's raising of the widow's son demonstrates he was also interested in making this life as fulfilling an experience as possible.

On the other hand, today's I Kings pericope was written at a time in salvation history when no one knew about a heaven (or a hell). Our sacred author presumes this is the only life we'll ever know. So it's important that Elijah bring the widow of Zarephath's son back to life - not only for the boy's sake, but also for the greatly improved quality of life which the widow would experience by having her son grow old with her.

Unless we appreciate the importance of this life, we're liable to miss some of the most significant messages our sacred authors are trying to convey. Following God in the right way should make this life enjoyable. Our biblical writers are committed to showing us that right way.

If Paul, for instance, were only interested in getting into heaven, why did he become a follower of Jesus? He could have accomplished that feat by just being a Mosaic law-abiding Jew. As we hear in this letter to the Galatians, his conversion certainly created more problems for him - especially from many of his fellow Christians - than he ever had to deal with as a faithful Jew.

In today's passage, he stresses that he once was so content in the traditional Pharisaical interpretation of faith he even persecuted those who, because of their experience of the risen Jesus, had begun living a different kind of faith. Yet, once he himself encountered the risen Jesus on the Damascus road he also began to experience the life-changing value of becoming another Christ. That encounter came with a broadening of his mind. He seems to have immediately and instinctively understood that in the plan of the risen Jesus, non-Jews were on the same level as Jews. Gentiles should be permitted to convert to Christianity without first converting to Judaism. That's the "gospel" Paul preached; that's the "good news" that constantly got him into trouble with conservative Christians. Yet as he insists in today's passage, his gospel was "not of human origin, but it came directly through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

I fear we've so emphasized eternal life, that we've totally ignored the value of this life. Our Christian faith doesn't just consist in keeping special rules and regulations which guarantee we'll one day get into heaven; rather, as Paul testifies, it's also doing what's necessary to daily encounter the mind-expanding risen Jesus. He presumes such an experience will change our lives for the better just as it changed his.

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