

“Symbols of Mystery”

Rev. David Gregory

August 1, 2021

Pentecost 11



Readings

John 6:35-38

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life. The person who aligns with me hungers no more and thirsts no more, ever. I have told you this explicitly because even though you have seen me in action, you don’t really believe me. . . . I came down from heaven not to follow my own agenda but to accomplish the will of the One who sent me.

William L. Wallace

from the *Celebrating Mystery* collection at progressivechristianity.org

Eucharist is a Way of looking at life in which we see
all water as wine,
all air as the breath of God,
all sunlight as the fire of the Spirit,
all earth as womb.

It is a way of visioning beyond the realm of logic to the shadowy world of the mystery of the human mind where the play of symbols creates a world of vitality, humor, reverence and delight.

If you were to describe this congregation in one word, what word would you choose? I choose “unique.” In the journey of my life’s work, I have encountered a wide variety of religious observance, many systems of faith and practice, with different traditions, agendas, and ideas about mission. I have moved pretty freely among several denominations, and I can honestly say I’ve enjoyed the ride. I’ve learned a lot from each experience, and I’d have to say that the places I have been to, and particularly the places I’ve served have all shared more similarities than differences. Each place has had its own personality and culture, but there was always a rather typical structure to be followed, certain rituals that might as well have been set in stone. It might sound a little crazy, but they even

smelled the same. If someone were to blindfold me and walk me into a library, I would know where I was. The same could be said for most churches, particularly those in the Midwest and in the East. There's a thing called church smell. I have no science for this, just my subjective experience.

My point is that this church does not smell like any of the others, which becomes a great metaphor for this unique quality that Tripp and I noticed from the first moment we clicked on the CCC website. In two or three more clicks I found my way to "Our Covenant," where I read the following words,

Our covenant is to live out the questions together hand in hand, supporting the fragile, protecting the wounded, giving the angered space and time, dancing with the free, celebrating moments of balance and not fearing the unfolding of imbalance. Believing in the power of God's revelations, we share a living awareness that faith and hope and love are the inhaling and exhaling of life, as necessary and real as the air we breathe. Therefore, while praying, studying, working, and celebrating together, we shall experience the moments of our lives in spontaneous response to the call of God.

You see what I mean, don't you? It took me about three minutes to say that I really need to meet the people behind these words—first of all to see if they really mean it, and secondly to see how this all plays out spontaneously, in real time.

I remember that my first Sunday as your minister was the first Sunday of the month, traditionally "Communion Sunday" in the churches of our denomination. In that first communion service together, I followed by rote the words that I was taught to say in celebration of the elements. It was like trying on a pair of shoes that are too tight. It felt like the first day in a new school where you're awkward and out of place. And I instantly knew that this was a place where my life and ministry could be transformed. It was a creative space that no one had offered me before. It was frightening, but delicious. This is a unique place.

Whether you call it Communion, Holy Communion, or Eucharist, it's probably the only thing that the vast majority of churches hold in common. You can spend a Sunday with fundamentalists and evangelicals, Roman Catholics and high church Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, or Methodists, and you'll find the bread and the cup represented in some way. One might say that it's a core function of my identity as a "minister of word and sacrament" to not only stand before you in proclamation, but to also offer the blessings of sacred practice, with ties to the very beginnings of the Christian church.

Over centuries, theologians have debated the form of the Eucharist, as well as its meaning. In my early seminary training I had to write papers on transubstantiation vs. consubstantiation. Assuming the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, just what was that presence? Was it physical? Was it spiritual? Was there grace offered in the elements themselves, or was the power in the symbolism? Or is it simply offered as a memorial to the love that Jesus expressed around the table with his friends on his last Passover? Some see this last Passover as the institution of a whole new world religion, and as I've said to you many times, I'm not of that persuasion. Jesus, in my view, was a young rabbi who lived his brief life and died as a Jew. The beginnings of Christianity are a little later than that, advanced through the writings of Paul. Jesus seems to be instead a reformer of Judaism. So while the symbols of bread and cup are somewhat universal to Christian practice, the meaning of them is diverse, depending on the lens through which you view them.

So here we are, in a pandemic, unable to physically share the body of Christ all sliced and diced, like on the last Sunday before the lockdown a year and a half ago when, still maskless, we took tiny pieces of bread in our grimy fingers and dipped them in a common cup. From this vantage we can say, “What were we thinking?” At the time we were just doing what we’d always done, in observance of an ancient tradition. And just as with everything else, the pandemic has taken our familiar forms and rendered them rather useless for the foreseeable future, or maybe forever. I just can’t say.

As I said last Sunday, at the beginning of the lockdown I was asking two basic questions: *How will we hold the community together? And how will we keep the community moving forward?* So in the interest of maintaining community, I began offering a weekly practice of Communion on Zoom, and though that service will take a brief hiatus while we are away, it continues to this day. Not only has it been a means of holding community, it has also evolved its way forward. We’ve taken to calling it “Communing” in order to emphasize the rationale behind the practice. It has created space for some deep moments of connection. The whole thing takes about twenty minutes out of the noon hour, but the experience can sometimes leave us speechless. There are morsels of food—sometimes it’s bread, or a grape, or a cracker—followed by a sip of water, juice, tea, or coffee. The point is to take the most common thing at our fingertips, like Jesus apparently did at the Passover. They were simply the things that were in front of him, which he held before his friends, offering thanks and saying “I’m going away. Please remember me, and the things I’ve taught you.” Perhaps it was his way of tying the disciples together in common relationship. Maybe he was teaching them the sacrificial nature of love. Maybe it was the means by which a relationship or a bond could be formed that might carry them through a difficult experience, like a Roman invasion, or even a global pandemic.

In this creative space we call CCC, we come here today to commune with one another, to express a sense of mystery that can leave us speechless but connected. Jesus said:

I am the Bread of Life. The person who aligns with me hungers no more and thirsts no more, ever. I have told you this explicitly because even though you have seen me in action, you don’t really believe me.

Maybe we can’t answer all the questions, but we can live in them. Maybe we cannot grasp all the transcendence that we call God, but we can pick up a piece of bread and know the sacrifices of all the people it took to bring it to our table. We can offer our thanks, receive with gratitude, and be nourished together as one people. In the words of William Wallace:

*Eucharist is a Way of looking at life in which we see
all water as wine,
all air as the breath of God,
all sunlight as the fire of the Spirit,
all earth as womb.
It is a way of visioning beyond the realm of logic to the shadowy world of the mystery
of the human mind where the play of symbols creates a world of vitality, humor,
reverence and delight.*

It’s all a beautiful mystery to me.