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Season after Pentecost
October 5, 2003

The Bread We Break

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast....

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*

Years ago I was visiting the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. I decided to take a look at a temporary exhibit entitled "Art in Our Time." I strolled through an array of paintings and sculptures, strewn around the walls and floors in a riot of shape and color. One painting in particular caught my eye. It was a very large canvas upon which was painted the cluttered, dirty corner of a vacant apartment. Bits of discarded this-and-that were lying on the floor. Old paint was spattered on the walls. Two frayed electrical cords hung limply from a wall socket. I was puzzled. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to feel, but experienced a growing feeling of boredom and even depression. Maybe that's what the artist had in mind. The whole exhibit, I realized, did nothing to take me beyond myself.

I went from there to my favorite section of the museum, of any museum, actually—Asian art. I spent the rest of my time contemplating Japanese and Chinese paintings, many centuries old. What a contrast both in art and experience! Chinese paintings typically incorporate as much of reality as possible. Human figures are there, but quite small, set in a very broad landscape of fields, streams, steeply rising mountainsides, the sky itself. The eye moves from the small human being to the widening landscape, into the sky and eternity itself.

The contrast in what I had seen that day caused me to think deeply. On the one hand, there was the dirty corner of an empty room, which isolated the viewer within himself or herself. On the other hand, there was the scope of the Asian artist who asks us to see ourselves in the context of all creation.

The contemporary exhibit did, in fact, speak of our society—individualistic, self-concerned, with much loneliness in people's lives. Our vision of life is narrowed along lines of nation, race, economics, even religion. Our relationship to the natural world, the creation, around us, is one of disconnection that leads to destruction. We experience ourselves to a great extent as disconnected from other people, from the earth, from ourselves.

Dirty corner, or whole reality? Our faith speaks of whole reality, knowing ourselves in relationship to God, to the earth as creation, to others and ourselves as children of God. Dirty corner thinking has invaded Christian faith these days, creating a highly individualistic form of religion focused on personal, individual salvation. But that is not true Christianity. Our faith speaks of connectedness, of relationship, of mending what was broken. Even the word "salvation," as it is used in the Bible itself, doesn't mean the "saving" of an eternal soul for an eternal reward. The word in Hebrew means health, wholeness. It means healing what was broken and mending what was torn. It has to do with the restoration of community and the individual within that community. Christian faith is not a solo venture. To be a Christian is to belong to a community that includes people, the creation, and God. Whole reality.

Today is World Communion Sunday. This is a significant day in the history of the Church of the Covenant. The first official service of worship was held on World Communion Sunday, October 4, 1950. The date was chosen, I imagine, quite intentionally. For World Communion Sunday is a day of remembering that the church of Jesus Christ on earth is one, regardless of how its behaves otherwise. Jesse M. Bader, a Disciples of Christ minister and ecumenical leader, began World Communion Sunday in the early 1900s. He wanted one Sunday of the year to be a conscious celebration of the unity of all Christians. The first Sunday of the month would be a day when most Christians would be sharing the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, or Communion.

The sharing of the Lord's Supper is the foremost expression of the connectedness we have in Christ. It is a celebration of restored relationship. It is awakening from the dream of separateness, the illusion of isolation. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about the meaning of the Lord's

Supper. He described the bread and cup as “participation,” a “sharing” in the very life of Christ. The Greek word he used was *koinonia*, and it means fellowship or participation in a profound sense. The same word is used to describe the nature of the Christian community itself, a *koinonia* in Christ, his spirit and love. In the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist, we belong to Christ, we belong to God, we belong to each other, and we belong to the world as those who share Christ’s continuing ministry of reconciliation. When we share the bread and cup together we are reconnected with all reality through Christ—with each other, with our true selves, with the world as the creation, and with God. When we share the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper we become sacramental people, a community through which God is present and working for the world in redeeming love. Through the sharing of the Eucharist we are transformed from “dirty corner” living to “whole reality” living.

On World Communion Sunday, the emphasis is on WORLD and COMMUNION, or PARTICIPATION. Our vision is expanded so that we see ourselves within the wide context of God’s love for the whole world and all its people. That’s why it is good to hear the words of Isaiah as a backdrop to the Lord’s Supper. Unfortunately, over the centuries, the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper has been made into a kind of private rite of the church. It has been used to exclude rather than to include. Those who are not “members” of the church have been excluded, either intentionally or unintentionally, because they did not behave or believe in the “right” ways. But I have come to see over the years that this is not a right understanding of the Eucharist. It is a celebration and foretaste of God’s renewal of all life, of the whole world. And those who share it together do so as a community of that new reality.

Isaiah’s words speak of God’s renewal, healing, reconnection of all peoples and all nations. “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for ALL peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of will-aged wines...God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over ALL peoples, the sheep that is spread over ALL nations...the Lord God will wipe away the tears from ALL faces, and the disgrace of his people God will take away from ALL the earth.” God’s love and will are universal in scope and purpose. This renewal, this reconnection, this “salvation” of all life is accomplished by God’s gathering faithful people together, people who live out this “communion,” this *koinonia* in their own life together and as their mission in the world. The communion of the Lord’s Supper, then, is not a private party for the select few, but an open table for all. The circle of our belonging expands from this table to envelop the whole world. This understanding keeps the church from becoming a “dirty corner” group that withdraws into itself and from the world. We are “saved,” made whole, by God’s love in Christ that draws us beyond ourselves into community. At this table we are reconnected with all reality through Christ—with each other, with the world, with God.

As we share the bread and cup of Christ, we see deeply into the true nature of things. We see that we are made one with each other and with the creation, that we are made one with God. We see that we are one with all people beyond the differences that are made into divisions—language, culture, race, ways of worshiping and serving God and our fellow human beings. We are made one with the world and then sent into that world to be people who live by a different and saving vision of reality.

This World Communion Sunday is the forty-ninth anniversary of the Church of the Covenant. Next year we will celebrate fifty years of community life and mission. That will be a significant time of celebration for us. But we don’t have to wait another year to experience renewal. We can begin today, right now, on this Sunday as we share the Eucharist together. We can touch Christ in the bread and cup. We can touch one another as those who belong deeply to one another. We can touch the world as the good creation of God, longing for renewal. We can touch God’s call to us in Christ, individually and together, to be a sacramental people. The bread which we break and the cup which we share, these are a participation in Christ’s life, the life that is most real and meaningful, the life that is connected, healed, made whole again. Here at this table we are made one with God, each other, and all people because we are made one with Christ. And here, just as the bread is broken, just as Christ’s life was broken and given, we become those whom God gives to the world. Through our lives and our life together, God can provide a rich feast for all people, can lift the shroud that is cast over all people, can wipe away the tears of all people. On THIS day we can say: This is our God, for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in God’s salvation.