

Sermon for Sunday, February 3, 2019

"COMMUNING WITH CHRIST"

"But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way (Luke 4:30)." That's the last thing we want to have happen today, in this hour, because we are here this morning to enjoy communion with Christ. We have gathered in the name of Christ, and will break bread and drink wine in remembrance of him in order to sense his presence in our midst, to be empowered by his Spirit, and to renew our faith in his promises. The last thing we want is for Jesus to just pass through our midst, as if scorning our church in search of more fertile territory. At least I hope that is the last thing we want.

Jesus had come home to Nazareth to announce to his friends and kin that he believed himself to be the Messiah, God's anointed one, who would, as the prophet Isaiah predicted, "bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, who would let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." It's not surprising that the townspeople were a bit skeptical. They had heard the rumors about Jesus, about how he preached and healed people, but this was Joseph and Mary's boy. He'd sat on their laps as they told him the stories of their Jewish ancestors, played in their homes, eaten at their tables, even dated their daughters. How could he really be the Messiah?

Jesus understood their doubt and had expected it. But their doubt and skepticism turned to rage when he sat down and shared with them his interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy. He said, the truth, is that the good news of God's redemption is coming to those who will hear it, believe it, and demonstrate it in lives of devotion and obedience. If not you, God will save the Gentiles, just as God did on other occasions in our history when we were stubborn and unfaithful.

That made them angry, really angry, because they were God's own people, and Jesus' neighbors. It was audacious enough that Jesus was making a claim to be God's messianic servant, but to suggest that God would ignore them in favor of the Gentiles was an unbearable insult, even blaspheme. The Gentiles were good for nothing but to be fuel for the fires of hell. They were unclean, unfaithful, unscrupulous, unreliable, pagans. And how could Jesus say such an offensive thing to his family and friends, who had nurtured him in the bosom of their fellowship all those years? Surely, he must be possessed by a demon. So as was their custom with persons they thought were possessed by demons, they drove him out of town and tried to throw him off the cliff. But according to the disciples, Jesus miraculously passed through the midst of them and went on his way, never to return to "commune" with his family, his neighbors, and his closest friends.

Jesus' own people, had heard the good news of God's redeeming love as bad news for them. Why? Because the good news promised to end their status as a people of privilege. Yes, they were still first in God's heart, but would remain so only if they put God first in their hearts. That meant loving everyone the same, Jew or Gentile, oppressed or free, ignorant or knowledgeable, poor or rich. It also meant demonstrating in the world the economic justice of God in which rich and poor worked together to provide for the needs of all God's precious children, a world in which everyone is treated equally.

Jesus declares that the good news of God's redemptive love is a promise made to everyone, not just to a chosen few. And the promise God makes is that all the oppressed shall be free, that all the captives shall be forgiven, that all of the blind shall have their sight restored and that all the poor will hear good news. But it's also more than just a promise, because everything Jesus declares, he also demonstrates. Which means that if we in the church truly wish to be the body of Christ, we also must demonstrate the equality, the freedom, the healing and the justice of the good news we proclaim on behalf of Christ, at least we must if we really want to commune with Christ.

If we fail to be the body of Christ and demonstrate Christ's love, that is, if we look down at our brother or sister as less worthy of God's love than we are, if we think white skin is superior to black skin or that Arab-American is less trustworthy than Anglo-American, or think that the homeless are just reprobates, or that women are less capable than men, or that the young are not as deserving as the old, or that the divorced are not as good as the married, we will not enjoy the communion for which Jesus gave his life. And when we gather together to celebrate the Lord's Supper with our hearts tainted with prejudice, and self-superiority, the Lord Jesus will not abide with us, but will pass through the midst of us and go on his way.

There is a price to communing with Christ. The price, is sacrificing our self-centeredness, our pride, our smugness, our prejudice and our self-righteous indignation in order to love one another even as Christ has loved us, to treat every person we see as one for whom Christ died, to see in each face no matter how rich, poor, black, white, foreign, native, young, old, male, female, healthy, unhealthy, Christian or non-Christian, the Lord himself. If we are honest, we know it is a heavy price to pay. Pay it, and you may be hurled off a cliff by the very folks you try to love.

As Christians desirous of communing with Christ, we are called to love our enemies, forgive those who wrong us, and be reconciled to one another. There is nothing wrong with judging each other's actions, holding fast to certain moral and ethical values, and calling each other to account for mistakes and misdeeds. But if we use those judgements and values to count ourselves as morally and ethically superior to others; if we use them to separate ourselves from those who don't measure up to our standards; if we use them to accuse those whom we think are naughty, we fail to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the communion we were destined to enjoy is shattered.

The vision of Isaiah which Jesus read in Nazareth, and used to declare the year of the Lord's favor, was a vision of God's promised Jubilee. In the year of Jubilee, which was supposed to be observed by the people of God every fifty years, and never was, everything was made equal again. All debts were cancelled. All slaves were set free. The land was allowed to lie fallow for a year, and beasts of burden were released. Equality before God was reestablished as a reminder that the earth, and everything and everyone in it is the Lord's.

In the celebration of communion, Christ calls us to proclaim and demonstrate God's Jubilee. At his table, all the captives are forgiven, all the oppressed are set free, the poor hear good news and the blind receive their sight because Jesus is Lord, not us. If we demonstrate such love at our communion table, the Lord Jesus will abide with us in the midst of our fellowship. And if we are so bold as to demonstrate such love in the world, not only will people be joining our fellowship, but the day will truly come when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess together, that Jesus is Lord of all.

The shadow of the cross looms large over the table of the Lord. It reminds us that all of us are equal before God. We are equally corrupted by sin, equally saved by grace, and equally servants of the Lord. When we gather together to celebrate the Lord's Supper we want the Lord Jesus to commune with us. We want him to dwell in the midst of us, creating and sustaining that koinonia fellowship that he promised those who would speak his gospel and demonstrate his love to the world.

Let's be sure to hear the proclamation of the gospel as good news, even though it confronts the sin that yet lurks within our hearts and within our society. And let's be sure to demonstrate in our lives what we have heard with our ears, and seen with our eyes, and believed as the truth. Let us be the body of Christ, for whenever we gather in his name, he is here...in the midst of us.

Rev. Dr. Mark P. Thomas  
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church  
St. Louis, Missouri  
February 3, 2019  
Luke 4:21-30