

Communion – a gift to the church!

John 6: 35, 41-58 – Whoever eats my bread has eternal life

So, Jesus said, “I come that they may have life and have it abundantly.” The question for us today is; how will we receive this gracious gift from God? Are you ready to eat the bread of life and drink of the cup of life, knowing that when you do you will never be hungry or thirsty again? Or, will you question Jesus claim like some of the Jewish people focusing on a more literal interpretation of Jesus word? Many people and preachers alike, and I would put myself in this category, try to avoid this passage at all costs because of the graphic cannibalistic nature of Jesus words, which say, “Very truly I tell you unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”

Some scholars have pointed out that this passage in John's gospel is a symbolic version of the Lord's supper. Now unlike the other gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke in the gospel of John there is no actual Passover meal written about or the institution of the Last Supper and when I talk about the institution the Last Supper I'm talking about the words where Jesus instructed the disciples to take eat to drink and remember him well doing it.¹ John refers to it was Passover and then skips over a bunch of stuff. In thinking about this I wonder why did John not do what the other gospel writers did? For John it was more important to connect the Lord's supper with Jesus life rather than his death. We know the story of the Israelites which is referred to in the scripture. The Israelites walked to the promised land. It took them 40 years, and, on that journey, God provided them with manna, with bread. God invited them to take only what they needed, but alas they became greedy and took more. According to the versus we heard today they died and did not receive eternal life. The bread that Jesus is offering is different. Jesus is the new manna giving life to God's people. Jesus saves life by giving life.

One theologian names Loye Bradley Ashton explained it this way,

‘the mystery of the incarnation is seen through the metaphor of eating and drinking. A eucharistic view of not only the incarnation of Jesus but of what it means to be human in an incarnational way. The language of flesh and blood

¹ O. Benjamin Sparks, *Feasting on the Word*; Year B, Volume 3, p. 356.

*emphasises embodiment. Flesh and spirit belong together according to God's intended plan for creation, and only by their union is true eternal life possible.*²

So, if Jesus is the embodiment of God, we then are the embodiment of Christ in and to this world. So, how do we do this? How do we accept the gift of abundant life and eternal life? This leads to the ultimate question; what has brought you to believe? How does your faith in Jesus nourish and sustain you?

I was rereading a book, by Henri Nouwen this week called *Can you drink the cup?* In the book Nouwen explores what it takes to drink of the cup that Jesus provides us. And he breaks it down into 3 parts: We hold the cup, we lift the cup, and we drink the cup. The cup that we are invited to drink holds our sorrows our joys and our blessings and when we drink fully of the cup we receive new life or salvation.³ Now holding the cup is the first part of the ritual. It's a moment of appreciation of what it is you are holding. It's the opportunity to figure out what is in the cup. For many the act of drinking wine or beer, coffee or tea or some other beverage requires all our senses. We take time before we sip it, first to look at it, to sniff it, to figure out what has been infused in this liquid. But holding the cup can be very difficult because many of us are so thirsty. Nouwen suggests that "just living life isn't enough we must know what we are living. A life that is not reflected upon isn't worth living so we need to take time to hold the cup and think about what it provides us."⁴

At a wedding reception recently, I found myself at very interesting table for dinner. As we waited for our meal I was placed at all too familiar situation where I was sat with the religious members of the family. For you see, this was a wedding in the backyard, the couple themselves weren't really religious, so I sat there and it was really nice to begin with lots of nice words about the service, but as I went to sip my wine, I found myself engaged in a conversation with a very, very conservative Christian who was struggling with the fact that his brother is gay, in a committed relationship and adopting a child. He shared his struggle with me in that moment and I am truly happy to report that he has come to see how the church treated his brother was wrong. He went on to explain to me that he still believes that the man is still in charge of the household and that is God's design. I found myself at that point really squirming in my seat. In the past, I probably would have simply sat there and listened and not said anything in hopes of escaping early, but then I thought about Jesus. Jesus challenged people. So, I took a sip of that wine, it gave me a little more confidence and I said, 'How many verses are there in the Bible about love?' and he looked at me like 'Uh-oh she's putting me on the spot.' He said, 'Well I don't know the true number, but many. There's lots.' And I said, 'Yes absolutely there's lots.' So, then I asked, "So how many verses in the Bible tells us at the man in charge or that being gay is wrong?" 'Well I can't really say.' I said 'Well let's just say it's about this (LOTS) versus this

² Loye Bradley Ashton, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 3, p. 382

³ Henri Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1996).

⁴ _____, p. 26.

(ZERO). I confessed at that point that I do not view the Bible as the literal word of God because there are just too many inconsistencies in it and to the United Church also looks at the Bible as inspired truth. He agreed that there are inconsistencies, and that's when it happened. We got to the heart of the issue. He wanted to know then, how do I live my life especially when things get difficult where do I turn the Bible is only a guideline? As I sip my wine I realised that I was being asked to answer the question; what is it that I'm drinking when I'm engaged in communion? As I sat there taking a sip of wine I had a thousand thoughts running through my head. This is almost as bad as being at the table of nonbelievers where they think I've been drinking the magic Kool-Aid and that I believe in something that doesn't exist.

So, after I took a deep breath, I shared what I had come to believe. I shared with him that I do look to the Bible for guidance and that it is truly a source of truth and inspiration for me and I look to my experiences. I look to others for I believe in the Holy Spirit works in and through each one of us. I told him that I put my trust in God and that I have received strength in times when I felt lost and in times when I have struggled. I've experienced healing in prayer. And the rituals of Baptism and Communion, where I feel connected to something beyond what is just human. And my life has been transformed when I chose the answer God's call and to journey with and be a sacred presence for others, believers and nonbelievers alike. Nouwen wrote,

*'Lifting up the cup is an invitation to affirm and celebrate life together. As we lift the cup of life we look each other in the eye and we say let's not be anxious or afraid. Let's hold our cup together and greet each other and let us not hesitate to acknowledge the reality of our lives and encourage each other to be grateful for the gifts that we have received.'*⁵

We shared a moment that night around that table and I hope, and I trust that he found some comfort but there are faith communities that believe that love is love and that we are not here on earth judge each other. We are here to support each other offer grace and unconditional love for this is what Jesus is offering us this day.

So how will you share your life with your church family? Will you dare lift the cup and let your friends and church family know what is in it? Think about it when sit down with her friends we offer them a drink; it's a sign. A sign that we're willing to engage with one another. If you offer somebody a drink and they say no it's usually because they want to tell you something and then leave. We believe that "Jesus' cup is a cup of sorrow and not just his own sorrow, but the sorrow of the whole human race. It is a cup full of physical, mental and spiritual anguish. It is a cup of starvation and torture, loneliness, rejection, abandonment and immense anguish. It is a cup full of bitterness."⁶ But that's not all.

⁵ Henri Nouwen, p. 56.

⁶ _____, p. 35.

“Jesus made the cup of God's wrath into a cup of blessing that's the mystery of communion. Jesus died so that we may live, and our suffering can no longer be a divine punishment. Jesus transformed it as the way to new life. His blood and ours too now can become martyrs' blood. Blood that witnessed to a new covenant, a new community, and a new communion.”⁷

We come to the table to receive the bread of life and the cup of blessing and when we do we are connected to the divine and to each other. We are holding each other's sorrows and joys. We are receiving the blessing of God. We are receiving life abundant; a life that has purpose and meaning for we are part of the call to bring peace and love to this world. We are called to feed shelter and nourish those in need. We are called to forgive and to believe. We are called to think of our friends too, like we heard in our story today. When we receive the bread and drink the wine look into the eyes of the person that is serving you. Know that you were seeing the eyes of Christ. You are holding and being held in joy and in your pain. Know that your soul has been fed and that the presence of the spirit brings wholeness to your life. For we are truly not alone and for this we give God thanks. Amen.

⁷ Henri Nouwen, p. 68