

Celebration and Participation in New Beginnings
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Nov. 2, 2008

Scripture

First Scripture Reading: Matthew 28:16-20

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

One of the rites of fall in this neighborhood
is an odd blend of Halloween and electoral politics.

It began five years ago with a group of men and women,
including our Parish Associate Rev. Diane Mowrey,
who gather to drink coffee on Saturday mornings
and perform acts of carpentry
when the mood strikes them.

Out of that gathering came the idea of building
a set of shelves the length and height of a tractor trailer
for displaying dozens and dozens
of carved Halloween pumpkins.

But, as Halloween always lands within a few days
of the November elections, what has been dubbed
the Great Pumpkin Wall also makes a political statement
... usually a word or a name
that is popular with Democrats.

The first year a photograph of the wall appeared prominently
in the A section of the Sunday New York Times ...
and it has become something of a local happening.

If you haven't seen it, it's only about three blocks away
and is worth the drive.

For the Cleghorn girls, participating in the wall is a tradition
of self expression that wouldn't be missed.

There is something liberating about carving a pumpkin
knowing that if it doesn't turn out quite right ...
there are always more ideas to be attempted ...
because it takes a lot of pumpkins to fill up the wall.

Last year, Ellison, our oldest, carved a pumpkin
with the words Hello Kitty in loyalty
to that adorable children's icon.

This year, her pumpkin bears the slogan "I love New York."

My how they grow up quickly.

Whether you are part of the Great Pumpkin Wall or not,
we have all been given the chance to participate
in something much larger – the participatory style
of government that is the duty
and the privilege of being an American.

Perhaps like you, I've been encouraged by the reports
that one out of three voters in America has already voted.

Regardless of our party affiliation, that is a good sign
of the health of our Democracy.

And perhaps like you, I am doubling up on my prayers that,
whatever the outcome, this Tuesday is indeed
a new beginning:

A time when we can heal quickly the shrapnel wounds
that result from the outrages of electoral politics ...
and be about the business of being a better nation.

A time when we can once again assert what is best
within us ... at home and around the world.

A time when we establish a more constructive
and inclusive tone in our national dialogue and policy.

A time when we reclaim an understanding of the greater good
without having to label that aspiration an evil doctrine.

A time when we remember that we make the most
of our future and our children's future
when take care of the least of us.

In all of these ways, any election is the opportunity
for a new beginning, but this year ...
perhaps more than most.

Because of that, it is altogether appropriate
that we precede Tuesday's events by participating today
in a new beginning of a different ...
and far more significant nature.

I am talking about the Holy Sacraments of our church,
both of which we have the opportunity to celebrate today.

* * *

As with other Protestant denominations,
the Presbyterian Church celebrates two sacraments ...
Baptism and Communion, otherwise called the Lord's
Supper.

We celebrate these two because they are the two
Christ gave us, as our scripture readings described.

The sacraments have always been at the center
of the experience of worship ...
therefore at the center of the Christian life.

In fact, because some in the Catholic Church had begun to use the sacraments as a tool for control and manipulation ... the sacraments were one of the main issues of the Protestant Reformation, which sought to return access to the things of the church to all people.

We 'celebrate' the sacraments here at Caldwell on a monthly basis ... but many of us may have been in churches where it felt like anything but a celebration.

Not long ago, I was with someone who called the Lord's Supper a "dead ritual" that belonged in worship at most only twice a year.

As I reflected on that statement, I was sad for him ...
and even more sad for the church at large,
which had obviously failed to convey
the life-giving restoration these sacred acts can provide.

These acts, my friends, are NOT intended to be
a solemn obligation we meet
because Jesus “commanded” it.

Instead, they are a gift and a source of transformation ...
empowerment ... sustenance ... and healing.

Together with the reading and preaching of the Word of God,
they set worship apart as our “alternative world” ...
a world oriented not to our needs so much
as it is oriented to God and what God
has done for us.

These acts are signs and seals of God's grace.

That is why they are worth celebrating!

That is why, if we have lost their meaning,
we should be about the business of recovering them.

* * *

Baptism is the symbol of initiation into the household of faith,
a sign of cleansing from sin,
and a dramatic proclamation of dying
and rising with Christ.

Baptism is a Christian's entry into the "royal priesthood"
and the mark of belonging to a community of saints
that stretches not just from our front pew to the back pew
... but extending beyond time and space.¹

In baptizing children, as we did with Tyler this morning,
we celebrate the fact that God has called him
to be raised in a family of faith.

This is a witness to the truth that our sovereign God
claims us before we are able to respond in faith ...
a new beginning unlike any other.

¹ Based on language from the Companion to the Book of Common Worship, p. 155

We recognize that God's grace, signified in the gift of baptism,
exceeds our understanding ... a confession that faith
is a mystery that we can never fully grasp,
even if we spend a lifetime of faith walking with God.

In that way, we are always children and the God
who has claimed us is always our parent.

Tyler has the promise of Jeff and Michelle ...
and this entire congregation ... that we will share
in the responsibility of raising him in faith,
doing our best to teach and interpret
this grace-filled mystery.

In doing this, even when we confess that we do not have
all the answers, we heed Christ's call to baptize others
in the name of our triune God.

This gift ... this opportunity is worth celebrating.

It may also be that some of us have the same kind
of recovery work to do with the Lord's Supper.

This supper is not intended to be a funeral focused
on Christ's suffering and death, inspiring in us
only feelings of sorrow, regret and penitence.

Unlike other denominations, we do NOT claim ...
nor do we believe ... that the bread and the cup
are transfigured into Christ's actual body.

They are instead signs of the promise of resurrection.

So, in breaking this bread and drinking this juice of the grape,
we recall not just the last supper ...
but all the meals Christ enjoyed with his faithful friends ...
and all the meals his friends and followers celebrated
in his name after the resurrection.

In this way, friends, let us always look on this table
as a foretaste of “a messianic banquet . . .
a glorious meal at which the table is set in heaven
for the whole human race.”²

If all this blows your fuses ...
it it seems like an awful lot to squeeze out
of a few drops of water, a bite of bread and a sip of juice,
then you are in good company.

² Ibid, p. 35

The great Christian writer and theologian C.S. Lewis was asked by friends why he had not ever written anything about Communion.

In a letter in response, he readily admitted he did not think he had the right words to describe the transformation he experienced in communion. He wrote:

“Here a hand from the hidden country touches not only my soul but my body.

Here the prig, the don, the modern in me have no privilege over the savage or the child.

Here is big medicine and strong magic....

The command, after all, was Take, eat: not take, understand.”

So it is a table we can approach with joy ...
and also with humility ... for we have these words
from the Gospel of Luke:

“Then people will come from east and west, from north and south and will eat in the Kingdom of God.

Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” (Luke 13:29-30)

* * *

Let me conclude by returning to the word I used
at the outset – participate.

It's a word we can understand in relation to how we participate in things like elections or smaller routines like committee meetings or parent-teacher conferences.

But it may sound foreign in the context of the sacraments.

As we know, Christ said "Do this in remembrance of me."

It is noted in one liturgical resource that

"The words for "remember" in both Hebrew and Greek (the original languages of scripture) include a sense of joyful and grateful participation in the present reality of the events recalled As some have put it, at the (communion) Table, we remember ourselves into the future."³

³³ Ibid, p. 36

That is a powerful notion, isn't it?

That the sacraments are about the present and the future,
... not just the past.

That they are about *doing* more than just receiving ...
more about life and living than death and dying.

So we "remember" not as passive recipients but as active
participants.

In that way, the sacraments are the two actions
that precede all the other actions we take as believers
to be signs of God's kingdom to come.

In that way, every time we adopt a child in baptism ...
and every time we share the bread and the cup ...
we recover what we need to go on ...
we make a new beginning ...
and we remember ourselves into our future
with each other and with our God.

Amen.