

Reconciling Faith, Pt. 2
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Rev. John Cleghorn
Text: John 6:56-69

Last week we considered what it means to practice a reconciling faith. Reconciliation is the act of ending some kind of conflict and bringing two or more parties back into a relationship of harmony.

Some of us may think that we don't need reconciliation. We look at our many relationships in life – family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, other believers, other religions. We look and may say to ourselves, "It's all good."

But we would be deceiving ourselves. Yes, some of those relationships may be healthy and life-giving. But there is no way any of us can live in the world today and say we are not called to be agents of reconciliation. On this weekend, when we gasp for a little clean air between the media-hyped rhetoric of two national political conventions, we are so keenly aware of all that divides us as Americans, much less Christians. We would like to believe that we just disagree. But the sad truth is that we *are* in conflict and in need of reconciliation if we are to find a way forward as a people.

As Christians, we are products of reconciliation. In Christ, we are reconciled to our Creator. We know that theological truth. But the practicalities of peace-making so often evade us. This morning we are given a story from the gospel of John in which Jesus speaks about his body and blood as signs of reconciliation. As we prepare to be fed by the great feast that is laid out on the table before us, I propose we attend to three questions that come out of this story:

First, how are we reconciled to God and each other in Holy Communion, this odd ritual we practice every month, a ritual that sets us apart from all other religions?

Second, what is the role of the Holy Spirit in the reconciling power of communion?

And, third, as people of God, renewed by communion, how are we as the body of Christ to be reconciled to the broken, busted and bankrupt ways of the world?

Let's start with the first question – how we are to understand exactly what happens here with the bread and the cup.

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Jesus could have hardly chosen a better way to launch a controversy. All he really needed was the first line of today's reading in the fourth gospel:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." (John 6:56)

To the Hebrews who already were pushing the limits to follow this radical teacher, this pushed them even further, to the point of breaking off the relationship. Hebrew religious law strictly forbid the consumption of meat with the blood still in it. So the notion of drinking blood, well, it was an outrage. Suggestion of cannibalism was equally, if not more, unthinkable.

But Jesus continued:

Just as the living Creator sent me, and I live because of the Creator, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. (John 6:57-59)

It's easy to imagine one of the disciples muttering to another: "OK, Jesus, you got off to a rough start. Now, whatever you are trying to get across to us, you are *not* helping yourself out here!"

Instead, according to scripture, the disciples said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" At times, scripture is the model of understatement. This feels like one of those times. Still, their words might be our words. This teaching is difficult, to say the least. Just what does happen at this table, when we come forward, take a piece of bread and dip it in the cup?

There are some "official" things that we hold true as Presbyterians, and they are important. This is one of two sacraments we celebrate (note the word "celebrate"). They are the two that Jesus gave us. The other is baptism, when a child (or an adult) is grafted to the body of Christ, the church. (With Caldwell's minor baby boom, we have some of those coming up.) Together with the reading and proclamation of the scripture, these sacraments form the backbone of our worship.

We do not believe this is actually the body and blood of Christ, though some traditions do. We DO believe these elements are signs and seals of our connection to God in Christ. That, sisters and brothers, brings us to what Jesus is saying in today's scripture.

At the center of this act is the idea of incarnation, the notion that God came into the world, the Creator and Holy Spirit now becoming flesh and blood as well. Some believers spend a lifetime seeking to be reconciled with that claim, trying to get their heads around this idea that Jesus was the God-Man, fully human and fully divine. If you ask me, spending our lives trying to get our heads and our hearts around that is a pretty good use of our life. And, to be sure, the fact that some are still working on their understanding of the incarnation makes them no less believers.

In verse 59, Jesus cuts to the chase when he tells his disciples, "This is the bread that came down from heaven."

In this we can all claim the truth that, like the manna that gave life to the children of Israel in the wilderness, Christ is the one sent by God to give us ever-lasting life. To try to iron out the rest, the science or biology of the incarnation, is only folly. We can and should give those details up to divine mystery, which comes with following a God whose ways always far, far exceed our simple understanding.

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That brings us to the second question presented by today's text: What is the work of the Holy Spirit in this act? What is the spiritual aspect of this sacred feast in which we, as sinful people, are reconciled to God and to each other?

Jesus' guidance for his disciples that day speaks to us as well.

It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. (John 6:63)

Scholars who have studied the original text actually disagree about whether Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps. Or, some say, perhaps Jesus meant the human spirit that lives in each of us.

Surely the Holy Spirit, which is inseparable from God the creator and God in Christ, is in this sacred sacrament, this act the church has practiced for 2,000 years. Indeed, it is in this act when so many of us feel closest to the Spirit, the carrier of the mystery that makes communion more than just dipping some bread in some juice. I see it in your eyes when you come forward for intinction. Whatever you bring, whether it is trouble in your life or joy, I see how precious you approach this moment and seek renewal in it.

I also think about those people who say they are “spiritual but not religious,” those folks who look for God not in a church but out on a hike in the forest or on a long bike ride. I don’t doubt that those experiences can bring peace and rest of a particular kind. But, at the same time, I wonder how they can know the full presence of the Holy Spirit outside the privilege and blessing that is the Eucharist, the celebration of the good news of God’s grace in Christ.

But what about the case that Jesus might not have been talking about the spirit with a capital S. In that case, at the very least, we come away from this table inspired, our own spirits renewed. That is the root idea behind the word inspired, after all. In communion, we are fed and nourished but also in-spired, given new life by the knowledge of the grace of Christ Jesus. As those who claim the identity of Christians, we abide with God in Christ at this table and Christ with us.

So, then, however we read Jesus’ words, we come away with the same truth: At this table, our tired flesh, made weary from the hurt and the conflict of the world, is rejuvenated. Our spirits are renewed also as we are reconciled once again with our God in the grace represented by this cup and this bread.

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Finally, then, we arrive at the third question this text seems to beg:

After being renewed at this table, how are we as the body of Christ to be reconciled to the broken, busted and corrupt ways of the world?

I don’t know about you, but I have my moments when the idea of becoming a monk has its attractions. Lately I’ve had more and more of those moments. Just step out of the world and commit myself to a life of prayer, away from the fray.

OK, I admit I probably wouldn’t last long. I don’t have the self discipline. But I doubt I am the only one here who sometimes wants to distance my walk in faith from the realities of this broken world. Just let me live in my bubble of faith and point my finger at the rest of it as fallen and unworthy of my full engagement.

For example, I told myself a few weeks ago that I would try hard to look honestly at all the arguments and positions being taken in this political season. I would try to be truly independent and objective in arriving at my vote. That is what we are all supposed to do, right?

Well, that didn't last long. First, I couldn't keep up with the accusations and counter-accusations, even with all the new fact-checking resources. It was a full-time job, which I suppose is what the political strategists are counting on. Then my stomach just turned as I digested all the spin and counter-spin, lies and half-truths, all defended by a system that says if you don't hit the other guy hard first, he will.

People have plenty other reasons to turn their back on the world. Episode after episode of random outbursts of violence, too often done in the name of some twisted ideology. Corrupt economic systems that only reinforce themselves. A disastrous healthcare system. Personal tragedy, personal loss.

Yes, the nunnery and the monastery does have their appeal. But, for the rest of us, to practice a reconciling faith means that we cannot walk away from it all. Our faith is to be lived out in the world. In John 17, we read Jesus' words that echo today's verses. In a famous prayer, Jesus petitions God that his followers be in the world but not of it. He asks God to protect them saying:

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one(John 17:9-11)

Jesus continued, saying:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. (17:16-18)

Being in the world but not of it isn't for the faint hearted. At the close of today's reading, some of the followers turn back. For them, the "teaching" is indeed too "difficult." But when Jesus asks the twelve whether they will turn back, they recommit to the journey. Peter the "rock" says:

Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God. (6:68-69)

And so a little later this morning we will come forward. We seek communion with God in Christ and with each other. Thus we fulfill Jesus' prayer to God, when he said "so they may be one just as we are one." In this Holy Communion, we celebrate that we are one, set apart to be in but not of the world.

When you come, I pray that each of you is renewed in mind, body and in spirit, by the grace of God, not to recoil from the world but to bring the way of Jesus into all of the world's broken systems.

And just before we walk out of here today, we will sing the words that declare our primary identity. That is, we are neither Democrat nor Republican nor anything else when we sing that old gospel hymn:

“I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back.”

Amen.