

JUNE 3RD, 2018: BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Exodus 24:3-8 Hebrews 9:11-15 Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

I've always been amazed at tourists who, at arriving at a famous site, simply park their car, get out, take a picture of it, return to their car, and drive away, never once spending even a few minutes actually looking at the site. They've got a picture of it, why do they need to spend their valuable time looking at it? As crazy as that seems, in my lifetime that's almost exactly what we did with the Eucharist.

When I was a child, almost no one went to communion. I can remember Sundays when more than 200 people were in church, yet fewer than 20 came up for communion. (In some parishes more than half the congregation stood up at communion time, but it was simply the first step in leaving church!)

People's reluctance to participate in the Eucharist was one of the reasons the church instituted today's feast. By specifically gearing readings, music, and liturgical prayers to the celebration of the Lord's Supper it was hoped the Eucharist itself wouldn't fade into the background. Something at the center of the earliest biblical Christian community was in danger of disappearing from its field of vision.

The reason was simple. The late Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes figured it out years ago. When asked why he rarely permitted his quarterbacks to throw passes, Hayes always responded, "Three things can happen when you pass, and two of them are bad."

By the first part of the 20th century, we had so many rules and regulations revolving around receiving communion that we frequently ran the risk of something bad happening when we walked up to the communion rail. For instance, if we were in the state of sin, we'd commit another one by going to communion; since we had to abstain from food and water from midnight on, even a sip of toothpaste water would be sinful. It was best to make only a "spiritual" communion. Couldn't commit any sins that way.

Thankfully by the '50s priests (and popes) began to encourage everyone to receive communion every time they participated in the Eucharist. Nowhere was this stressed more than on First Fridays, when nine of them in a row guaranteed you'd eventually get into heaven. We stopped taking pictures and began to actually experience the site.

Yet some of us are still reaching for our cameras at communion time. We refuse – for whatever reason – to receive from the cup. We habitually walk past the minister of the cup, believing it's for extra credit, something we don't need.

Listen carefully to today's Exodus passage. Those who have the blood sprinkled on them are showing they've made the covenant with Yahweh. The red blotches on their skin and clothes are the covenant's outward sign. Just as a wedding ring is an outward sign two people are committed to one another, the covenant blood is a sign they've formed a special relationship with Yahweh.

We know from I Corinthians 11, that Jesus also gave his followers an outward sign they're willing to carry on his ministry after his death and resurrection: receiving his blood. In some sense, receiving from the cup is more important than receiving the bread. If we're not going to carry on Jesus' ministry, he's died in vain. Perhaps Jesus intended us to first receive the bread simply to strengthen us to receive the cup.

We've still got a long way to go before we completely put our cameras away, and begin to rely on our experiences. If today's feast helps us do that, we're using it the right way. Just remember, the people who gave us our readings never saw a camera. It was all first-hand experiences for them, or nothing.

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JUNE 10TH, 2018: TENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 3:9-15 II Corinthians 4:13-5:1 Mark 3:20-35

Can't emphasize enough the importance of today's Genesis reading. One of the earliest writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, it not only sets the theme for many of the writings which follow, but more important for Christians, Jesus of Nazareth seems to have grounded his reform of Judaism in its theology.

Though frequently referred to as God's punishments for original sin, these verses are simply the Yahwistic author's reflections on the "human condition" we're all forced to experience. We have to endure certain things simply because we're alive. We have no choice.

In this specific pericope, the author reflects on our quest to eradicate evil – personified by the serpent. Employing the metaphor of someone stomping a snake to death with one's bare feet, she reminds her readers that only those willing to endure the pain that comes from being bit by the snake will eventually crush the snake. Our heel is never quicker than a snake's fangs. We'll kill the snake, but we'll limp for a long time.

Our Genesis author certainly wants her readers to eradicate evil, but she's realistic about the process. No one just snaps his or her finger and evil disappears. Before we tackle evil, we'd best check the height of our pain threshold. That's the main reason evil persists in our lives. There's not a lot of people willing to suffer through its eradication.

For Christians, here's where Jesus of Nazareth comes in. This first century CE Palestinian preacher was convinced the Yahwistic author had hit the nail on the head. There's no other way to make this world better. Unless someone is willing to suffer, evil remains. But he takes this snake-killing thing one step further. If our evil-destroying stomping includes giving ourselves to others, we'll not only help rid the world of this scourge, we'll also gain life for ourselves.

Our earliest Christian author, Paul, must constantly remind the people he's brought into the faith to simply "hang in there." We have no exact idea what motivates him to write today's II Corinthians passage, but we logically presume it has something to do with the struggle all Christians endure, simply keeping up the fight to get rid of the evil around us.

The first miracle Jesus worked in Mark's gospel was exorcising a demoniac. I mentioned when I commented on it several months ago that the first miracle in each gospel is very significant; it sets the theme for the whole gospel. It basically tells us what Jesus expects of his disciples. If, before anything else, he exorcises a demon, he's telling his followers they, like he, are to get rid of evil, no matter what it costs, no matter how painfully we limp.

That seems to be one of the reasons Mark composed today's gospel pericope. How can we expect to avoid suffering if Jesus couldn't avoid suffering? In this case, the suffering that comes from being misunderstood by those closest to us.

We can understand why some of Jesus' enemies – the Jerusalem scribes – interpret his snake-killing actions as coming from the devil himself. But what's worse, even his relatives – later identified as his "mother(!) and brothers" – are also convinced he's "out of his mind." The preaching that brings life to so many tears his own family apart.

How many of us, for family peace and tranquility, frequently keep our mouths shut instead of speaking up when we discover evil? Why would we create more evil by pointing out the evil that's already there?

If we eventually leave this world in the same condition in which we found it, we, and those around us might experience a peaceful, painless existence, but we'll never do what God put us on earth to do.

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