

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
 September 7, 2008
 09.07 Means of Grace--Communion

Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-14

I have a confession to make. You know that popular song from *High School Musical 3*, “I Want It All”? The older I get the more I realize it’s just not true, not for me anyway. I don’t want it all. All I want is you—that is, God. (Although I can’t really want God without wanting you, too. Jesus is pretty clear on that.)

I know, “I don’t want it all. All I want is you.” Sounds like a sappy love song they’d have played on the radio at the ice or roller skating rinks when I was growing up—songs with which I would have sung right along as I skated alone. (*A pathetic “Awww” would be an appropriate response here.*) In reality what it means is that I’m tired. I’m tired of all that world insists I find important. I’m tired of fighting for success. I’m tired of fighting for money. I’m tired of running after the latest fad or fighting to own the latest gadget. I’m tired of fighting for all these things that just don’t satisfy. I don’t want it all any more. I just want God.

The words of Paul in Romans 13:8-14 are especially meaningful for me this morning. As he draws toward his summation he writes, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” He goes on to say, “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness & put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling & drunkenness, not in debauchery & licentiousness, not in quarreling & jealousy. Instead, put on the Sovereign Jesus Christ, & make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Don’t try to have it all. Just put on Christ.

This was the longing of the early Methodist Societies, the reason for the one condition, the three General Rules, & the means of grace. Do you remember what those are?

- One Condition: “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, & to be saved from [our] sins.”
 Rule #1: “By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind.”
 Rule #2: “By... doing good of every possible sort, & as far as possible, to all.”
 Rule #3: “By attending upon all the ordinances of God.” (*The Book of Discipline of TUMC, 2004, pg. 48*)

The ordinances of God are six things identified by the Wesleys, commanded in scripture, & that experience has shown are vital to our relationship with God. They are included among the means of experiencing & living through God’s grace. Communion is one of them.

The background for Holy Communion is the Passover or *Seder* meal. Instructions for the celebration of the meal are found in Exodus 12:1-14. This is the Jewish day of Independence & the first day of the Jewish year. This is the day when freedom rings & all things are made new. Everything is to be done with haste—the cooking, the cleaning, the dressing & getting packed, even the eating of the meal. The people are to be ready to hightail it at a moment’s notice. There’s not even time for the bread to rise.

On this night the people are to take some of the blood from the lamb they have sacrificed & spread it on the lintel & doorposts of their homes. The blood is to be a sign unto God so that, when God (or God’s angel) passes through the land of Egypt, God will “pass over” the houses of the Hebrews & not kill their firstborn. The blood is to keep God out, to keep the wrath of God at

bay. In the story that follows, the people of Israel will follow God—but they will not face God. It's simply not allowed.

The Last Supper, the meal where the sacrament of Holy Communion is instituted, is a celebration of the Passover meal with Jesus & his disciples. (At least it is in Matthew, Mark & Luke. In the Gospel of John the Last Supper is celebrated the night before.)

On this night Jesus becomes the Paschal Lamb—the bread becomes his body, the wine his blood—that the wrath of God might “pass over” us, that we might find, in the place of God’s judgment, God’s forgiveness instead. For the disciples the sense of God’s wrath is very real, almost palpable. Their hope is that the wrath of God might truly pass them over, that God’s anger might not be exercised against them through the Romans & through the leaders of the Jewish people. The disciples remain hidden in an upper room, hidden by darkness, girded & prepared should wrath come upon them. They are bowed down. They do not wish to see the face.

But there is something different about this night. They are told to remember & to proclaim Jesus’ death *until Christ comes again*. They are told to look for the face—and they find it as Jesus returns but a few days later, returns from the grave, resurrected & very much alive. Yes, they will follow. But they will also face—and in the face of God’s mercy, love & grace they will find the strength to love & to live, to hope & to believe. In God they will find all that they have ever wanted, the One upon whom they might depend. And as they celebrate their *Dependence Day* they will find their freedom. Freedom from fear. Freedom from the power of death. Freedom to live the evangel—to live evangelically.

That’s all very nice. But communion as a means of grace—and one that we treat lightly at our own peril? Really? I remember communion as a child—dry paper wafers & a tiny sip of juice, every bit as meaningless as they were tasteless... & every bit as unsatisfying. I remember as I grew older—once I had been reborn in the Spirit, once I had gone off to seminary—trying to reclaim some sense of meaning in the sacrament. The bitterness of the rye bread became the bitterness of the sacrifice. The sweetness of the French became the sweetness of the evangel of God’s love. When the juice would drip upon my hands it became the blood on my hands, my guilt, my part in Jesus’ crucifixion.

But I never really knew just how important it was for me until I found myself barred from the table. No, it wasn’t a matter of theological or dogmatic discipline. It was allergies. I couldn’t have the bread. I couldn’t even have the yeast in the juice. The isolation I felt, the embarrassment—I’ve never been more desperate to receive the sacrament, the grace of Jesus Christ. Though I’m back at the table today, it still marks me, *even now*. All I want...

There was a story in *Homiletics* a few weeks back about a pastor who “was used to giving out crumbs until one Sunday when a little girl about 3 years old came to the front of the sanctuary with her mom to receive Communion. The pastor knelt down beside her & said, ‘This bread means that Jesus loves you very much’ & gave her a little piece of the loaf which she promptly wolfed down. Instead of moving down the line, she held out her hands in the way that she’d seen the people before her do, looked at the pastor with hopeful eyes & said, ‘More?’”

More. More of God’s grace. More of God’s love. More of God.

What is it I would have us do this week? (question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) **Simply this: long for more. Just long for more.**