

Can You Drink the Cup? Drinking the Cup
Ecclesiastes 9:7-12, Hebrews 2: 14-18, John 6: 52-69
August 5, 2007

As I sat in the surgeon's office looking at the x-rays of my nasal sinuses it was very clear what needed to happen. This highly respected specialist pointed out the major blockages that had accounted for years of repeated sinus infections. He pointed to the finger-like polyps that had developed on scarred tissue and had further blocked my sinuses. I now could see why I was 90% blocked on one side and 40% blocked on the other. I understood now why I couldn't smell or taste my food, why my voice sounded like a duck, and why my hearing was now being affected. As I had lost most of three of my five senses, leading to repeated illness and even a bit of depression, I saw what had to be done. The surgeon said, "Andy, yours is the kind of case for which we made this surgery. You are the sinus surgery poster child!" The surgeon performed the surgery flawlessly. In fact it went so well that he chose not to "pack" me. This term refers to the gauze that is placed in the sinus cavity to help heal the tissue and prevent excessive bleeding. If you have ever had this gauze removed you understand how much I appreciated the surgeon for sparing the discomfort of being packed and having this packing removed. My relief was instantaneous. I could breathe again through my nose. Foods tasted good again. I could smell, taste and hear. But I developed a slight nose bleed that persisted for several days.

Finally one Friday night I experienced the scariest night of my life. In the middle of the night I awoke to feeling somewhere between choking and nausea. I immediately realized that I was hemorrhaging blood. Katie quickly jumped into action and got me moving, getting me dressed and rushed to the car, as I continued to choke on my own

blood that was running out of my sinus cavity down my throat. My panic was that I was bleeding to death. At the emergency room at Twelve Oaks Hospital the staff had no success in stopping the bleeding. So I then went on a ambulance ride to Southwest Memorial Hospital. Finally, after my surgeon arrived at the hospital, he was able to stop the bleeding. At one point, the emergency room staff said to my wife, Katie, “you’re being so brave.” Annoyed and terrified at the same time, I said, “What am I, chopped liver?”

I tell this graphic, personal story this morning to illustrate two points. First, I had never felt my mortality so imminent as I lay bleeding what seemed like several pints of blood. Second, I now understand the Biblical prohibition of eating of the blood. The stuff is nasty. Still, central and unique to the Christian religion is the notion of Holy Communion in its most primitive form as the drinking of the blood and eating of the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ. If we for a moment take this sacrament literally we come to the conclusion of Roman opposition to the early church as a radical cult practicing human sacrifice and cannibalism. Now of course we mean this body and blood of Jesus in figurative terms. As I offer the cup at Christ’s table I may say interchangeably “the blood of Jesus given to you” with “the cup of salvation offered for you.” The important theology for all of us is that when we drink the cup we drink in the very life of Jesus Christ. I conclude this morning my series “Can You Drink the Cup?” We have looked in the last two Sundays at the movements of *holding* and *lifting* the cup. I have suggested that in holding the cup we encapsulate the human experience of joy in the midst of sorrow. To lift the cup is to celebrate our life in Christ and to realize that our attitude is

one of the inviolate choices we make, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. This morning we come to the ultimate act of celebration, drinking the cup.

Our speaker in Ecclesiastes is a wise old man approaching death. His life journey has been one of wisdom in the court of King Solomon. His theology can only be described as an ancient brand of fatalism. His words are written from a time in the Hebrew tradition when there was little or no faith in the afterlife. The final end was the grave. To “eat, drink and be merry” was a heroic stance to take in such a belief system. Qoheleth (Hebrew for the teacher), the speaker, makes these claims: that life is utterly finite, and even so, we should eat, drink and be merry, with an optimism that this is as good as it gets. Since the grave awaits all of us, we should give life every ounce of our drive and being. What awaits us is nothingness. Death is the great equalizer. Even the wise, the wealthy, the strong, the handsome, are the same in the grave. There is no escape from the grave. To dust you shall return.

For the Christian fatalism ends on that first holy week that starts with a cup and a loaf. It heads toward a cross and ends triumphantly at an empty tomb. The Eucharistic words of institution that we use in our liturgy come primarily from the synoptic gospels and Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. John’s gospel lesson today is the most difficult cup to swallow on that score. Why? For the first disciples they were committed people of the covenant. They had the Sinai Covenant, the law of God revealed through Moses that provided order to their lives. But also their Bible taught them of the Noahic covenant, that life was in the blood. All meats must be drained of the blood. Whether in temple sacrifice or in everyday living, the blood was sacred and never to be spilled. So here is Jesus saying you must eat of my flesh and drink my blood if you are to have life with

God. Indeed this is hard teaching. So they began to leave. It was only the twelve who stood behind and through the mouthpiece of Peter say, “Lord, where would we go? You have the words that lead to eternal life. We believe and know that you are the holy one of God.”

For us modern disciples of Jesus we don't believe in temple sacrifice anymore. Slaughtering animals couldn't be more foreign to us in showing our love for God. The writer of Hebrews speaks in the language of temple sacrifice. But what connects me to what this writer has to say is not the temple sacrifice metaphor, but his concern with the reality of death. Like Qoheleth he knows and makes reference to the fact that all of us know of the finality of death. The grave awaits all of us. I also connect to the constant consciousness of my sin nature. It is not a conscious guilt trip, but it is an everyday reality that my actions are filled with pride and self-consciousness. It is a knowledge that I willingly and unwillingly participate in systems of injustice in the way that I treat God's precious creation. That's sin nature. Loving others, in all of the forms that loving takes, doesn't come naturally for me. It is a gift from God. Death and sin nature for the writer of Hebrews is equated with Satan – the ruler of the earth. Jesus comes as the solution to this dilemma. The writer's logic is this: Human reality was that life sucks (sin) and then you die. But God doesn't want it that way. God wants all of us to be reconciled to God – to be repaired and restored. The children of Israel understood sin offering as Temple sacrifice. Blood sacrifice of an animal offering had to be made to atone for the sins of the people of a just God. If all of us live under the sin of Adam, we needed a new Adam to make us one. So the new Adam is Jesus Christ, who though sinless, became fully human, for only a sinless One could make atonement for the sins of the people. So Jesus became

the final atoning sacrifice that all of humanity through faith can claim forgiveness and reconciliation. The great, high priest is the Jesus of Hebrews, written so that the children of Israel could understand who this Christ was.

In the end I return to the cup of Christ, from the great High Priest who offers all of us his Blood. Can you drink the cup? What theology do we end up with when we talk about the Eucharist? What does Holy Communion really accomplish? As I close this series today I'd like to offer Gayle Felton's five points of what Communion is all about from her book United Methodists and the Sacraments. When we look at the totality of our Service of Word and Table, we see these points emerge from our liturgy. We receive these benefits when we drink of the cup and eat of the bread.

1. *We receive forgiveness.* This act of receiving God's mercy and forgiveness through a communal prayer of confession, silent confession, and receiving pardon is our first act in worship every Sunday. Christ's cup has canceled the power of sin in our lives. Taking personal inventory of those things and giving them over to God frees us for joyful obedience and serve as the spiritual washing of our hands as we prepare to come to the table. As we receive forgiveness we can pass the peace to every neighbor, even those who we have hurt or have hurt us. We come to the table with a clean slate.

2. *We receive nourishment for the journey of salvation.* As United Methodists we claim that salvation, healing from and union with God, is a lifelong process. Once forgiven, we do acts of mercy and acts of piety on the way to our salvation. Receiving the sacrament is an act of piety. It is a means of God's grace that fills us, not just so that feel good, but so that we go out Monday through Saturday growing in our walk through

service in the name of Christ. John Wesley said that we should receive Holy Communion at least once a week.

3. *We are transformed into the image of Christ* – Wesley called Holy Communion a converting ordinance. This does not mean that Holy Communion is a one-time conversion, but it enables us day by day, week by week, to be conformed to the image and likeness of God. It allows us to be freed from our sin nature. It allows us to become conscious of the ways that we are distanced from God in our participation with systems of injustice and oppression in the world and how we can oppress others. Communion converts us, brings us back to the loving arms of God in our lives.

4. Since it is a *communal meal*, we receive repair and restoration of relationships with those for which our relationships have become broken. We pray for those who in our family we may be at odds with and then we find them at the passing of the peace. When you pass the peace a little later this morning I want you not to just to hug the person who you are in right relationship with, but also the one or ones with whom you are estranged. Through that much bolder act we find peace with God.

5. *We are propelled out into mission of justice and love*. We are equipped to do works of mercy. Many of you have commented to me that the single most significant element of our liturgy is the prayer after communion. It is our acknowledgement that drinking the cup and eating the bread is not the final act. Instead we give thanks for the holy mystery in which Christ has given of Christ's very life so that we can give ourselves for others. For the final verb is not "come" but it is "go." It is in going into the mission field to give ourselves for others that we truly find ourselves.