

## Re-membering Christ

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

April 21, 2011 – Maundy Thursday – Browns Point UMC

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Before we came to the northwest, I worked for a program called the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation. Its main component is a two-week residential program for high school students, who come to Duke to study with theology faculty, serve the local community, and live in intentional community on a roughly monastic schedule of daily prayer and study.

One of the most important elements of the two weeks was nightly worship. Students came from a variety of Christian traditions, so we aimed to expose them to a variety of worship styles from free church Pentecostal to high-church Anglo-catholicism. Various clergy preached each night, and the music and overall ‘feel’ of the service changed dramatically from one night to the next.

One thing that stayed consistent throughout the two weeks, though, whether celebrated over a wooden crate in a field after gleaning collards or around an ornate altar appropriately doused with incense, was communion. Many of our students balked at the idea of celebrating communion every single night. Except for the overachieving Episcopalians among us, they were used to having communion once a month, at most, which meant that they would participate more in this sacred meal in two weeks at Duke than they had in the prior year – and for some of them, they would come to the table more in those two weeks than they had in their entire lives. They weren’t excited about it, either. Many of them told us we would make communion “less special” by doing it all the time. Those first days, they approached the altar with crossed arms and stern expressions, determined that we were ruining a good thing.

A funny thing happened, though, each summer without fail: by the end of the program, those same students had learned that the “specialness” of communion had nothing to do with how rarely it was celebrated, and those kids went home asking their pastors why they didn’t gather around the Eucharist table more often. It wasn’t just that we prepared *really tasty* elements: once they understood what was happening at the table, they just couldn’t get enough. And rightly so.

These words from Paul’s letter to the First Corinthians are familiar – we hear them regularly in worship – said or sung. It’s easy to hear them and skip right over to the procedural aspects of the sacrament: will we dip or sip? bread or wafers? wine or juice? pass through the pews or everyone come forward? So it’s a gift that each Maundy Thursday, we have a chance to really reflect on those words: “This is my body. This is my blood. It’s for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

That word, “remember” is crucial. But we have to understand that Jesus meant more than, “call me to mind” when he gave the command to “Do this in remembrance of me.” The word for “remember” isn’t the same as what we do when we pull mementos out of a box. With those kind of memories, with photos and recordings, each recollection puts more and more space between the people or events remembered and those doing the remembering. Each time we look at the photo, it’s further back in time. This sense of “memory” Jesus invokes is calling for our participation, so that we bridge that gap between past and present. That’s why it’s important that the remembering is imbedded in a ritual we can touch, taste, and smell. We don’t just call an event to mind when we come to the table – we participate in it again. And in doing so, the identity of those who first partook of this meal is passed on to us. We become part of that ongoing story of salvation, redemption, and deliverance. We become the body of Christ.

Every time we gather here to remember Christ and his work, every time we participate in the body of Christ, something is revealed, too: it’s the goodness of God’s creation, even those parts that

we see as ordinary – like bread and juice, or like ourselves. Communion, then, is a means of grace. It invites us into an *experience* with the living God who is host, liberator, creator, and self-giving servant. As we experience the meal, communion reminds us of who God is and what God has done, and, by extension, who we are, and what we are called to do: As we take and eat, we are nourished more and more with Christ’s own self, so that we become more and more like him and live more and more as his body in the world. As the bread is broken, barriers fall down and the world looks more like God’s kingdom, where all people gather around the same table, no matter their race, class, or gender.

When Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians, they were in the midst of some really hideous worship practices. They gathered for the Eucharist feast, but the rich would eat gluttonously and become drunk on wine while the poor went away hungry. Paul was trying to teach that church – and us, too – that the remembering in this meal is actually a re-membering of Christ’s body. The living Christ is made present here, and we are nurtured as “members” of that body. We re-member him here. When we share this meal, all of us around the table together, we become the body of Christ again: each of us, and all together.

By the end of the Duke Youth Academy, our students couldn’t get enough of this sacrament because they understood what happens here: that this is no empty ritual, but a participation in an alternative reality, a sharing in a foretaste of the kingdom, and a re-membering of Christ’s own body. They understood that participating in this meal is participating in God’s reign made present, that in eating this bread and drinking this cup, they were re-made into Christ’s living witnesses in the world. They understood that this bread and this juice are not just calories ingested – they are grace for transformation, of ourselves, and of the world. We are invited, too, to open ourselves to one another as the body is broken and the blood outpoured, to give our whole selves over as members of Christ’s body for the world. We are invited to taste and see the glory of our God, for we are his body, too.