

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“A Communion Meditation”
By Eric Howell
James 5:13-20
September 27, 2009

On the night Jesus was betrayed, the day before He was crucified, He sat for a dinner with His disciples and took bread and broke it and said, “This is my body broken for you.” And He took a cup and said, “This is the new covenant in my blood.” As we reflect on the passage from James this morning, about the connections between things that are physical and things that are spiritual, let’s have in mind that we will be invited, in a few moments, to come to the table to receive the bread and the cup, an act that is at once plainly physical and mysteriously spiritual.

When we first hear the passage from James, it sounds really nice and very familiar. When a person is sick, the church should pray for them. We do that.

But on a second, closer reading of the passage, we begin to notice some statements being made here that are not all that familiar to us. There’s something else going on here than just a cheerleading for prayer. Hear it again, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed.” Did you hear it? There’s this intertwining of sickness and sin for which prayer and oil are the prescription. Pray for someone who’s sick. We got that. And if he’s committed sins he will be forgiven.

And that just begins to sound foreign to us—that idea that sickness and sin are related. We get the idea of sin—that’s spiritual and religious. And we get the idea of sickness—that’s physical and medical. But it sounds jarring to our neat categories to hear the spiritual and medical intertwined. It doesn’t exactly say that sickness is caused by sin that needs to be forgiven. It doesn’t say it at all, but the two are brought close enough that some take this and other biblical passages as an invitation to a quick jump to the spiritual abuse of the sort that says, “The reason you have cancer is because you are a sinner.” “If you would just confess your sins, you will be healed.” Maybe you’ve heard that before. Maybe you’ve said that before. And, if you did, you probably did it with good intentions. Good intentions of the sort that says to someone who is suffering . . .

This is God’s will that your daughter died.

God has a purpose in everything. Everything happens for a reason.

God is trying to teach you something.

God is trying to get your attention.

Those kind of statements don't strike me as Truth. They strike me as attempts to find logical rationalizations by people who are convinced that there is an explanation for everything, physical and spiritual.

In the West, we are trained to be people who seek answers and explanations. We want to know how reality works. And that's why when people read this passage from James, they'll often ask:

How did the oil function as a healing/medicinal agent for the first-century church?

How does prayer actually work?

And when starting to think theologically, we'll ask: What precisely is the deal with the Trinity?

About communion: How does the bread and wine function?

Inquiring Western minds want to know even when it concerns the unknowable! Eastern minds shrug and say, 'It's a mystery.' Vigen Guroian, an Orthodox Christian living in Virginia, described it like this earlier this year about Easter time. He was talking about the Eastern and Western Christian understandings of the meaning of the cross. He pointed out the Western obsession with defining the minutiae of doctrine and contrasted it with the Orthodox embrace of metaphor and mystery:

In the east, there is less attempt to sort [the biblical] metaphors out, particularly because the hymns dominate so much. And within hymns, within hymnography, within prayers, within poetry, you can get away with a variety of metaphors. In a point of fact, they enrich the poetry or the hymns. So I think that's one way of accounting for the fact that the Orthodox have not tried to separate out these metaphors. There is a metaphor in the East, which I think is more at the center of Orthodox understanding of what happens. Christ assumes our whole humanity, our whole human nature and restores it to a state in which it can grow into holiness without obstruction (NPR, Speaking of Faith, April 2008).

And I think he's on to something here about the holistic nature of humanity and embracing mystery that might help us see James, see reality, suffering, and even the Supper set before us in a different light. Healing is about the whole self. The biblical world understood people to be unified, undivided wholes. There's not all the divisions that we usually think about today. There's just you. Just a person. And when a person is broken, hurting, suffering, it's not just a matter of working to cure a disease. The hope is to heal a person.

In this sense, healing means more than curing. Curing means you isolate a specific problem and try to neutralize or eliminate it. That's curing. It's scientific, specific, and terribly useful. Healing is something even more. It's more than cutting out what is wrong—it is making whole what is shattered. We all need healing—the world needs this kind of healing. Healing is for bodies . . . and for splintering marriages, and crushed parents, and fractured cities and nations.

So when we encounter this intertwining of physical things and spiritual things here in James, we are awakening to a deeper reality of the world than maybe we realize.

Many of us in the West are waking up to the wisdom of, as Thomas Merton called it, the hidden wholeness in all things. Rather than simply figuring this as an unenlightened, pre-scientific worldview, we are beginning to realize that a post-enlightenment, post-scientific sensibility invites us into the mystery that has been here all along. Christ came and took flesh and walked among us. The spiritual became physical. Things that are physical can be broken. That which is spiritual can be healing. All healing is and remains the work of Christ who gathers the shards of our broken lives and pieces them back together into a mosaic. Christ assumes our full humanity and transforms the potential of what it means to be human into what it means to be holy. He who was whole is broken that we who are broken may be made whole.

I have come to believe something like a hidden wholeness is present here this morning with the bread and cup. And I readily admit that I haven't always seen it. I have no illusion of the source of the bread and juice we use on a Sunday. I'm often the one who acquires them. It's not mysterious or magical to me. So to believe they are something more than simply bread and juice is to believe that something has happened to them since they were purchased. Now I do. They are fully bread from the bakery at HEB. I think the juice was Welch's grape juice. I bought them last night. Brought them here this morning. Wrapped the bread in the napkins. Poured the juice into the chalices. It was and is bread. It was and is juice. It's a simple meal, in the same way that Jesus took the common elements and served it at the Last Supper. I don't have any illusion about the source of the bread and juice. I also don't have any illusion about the perfection of the people who will break off a piece of the bread and dip it in the juice, including myself. We are all like that bread and juice—broken and crushed.

I don't suspect bread and juice do much curing, but they might just be the healing we need to be made whole. At the Eucharist, the bread and wine do not become the body and blood of Christ. Rather, the crucified and risen Christ becomes bread and wine for us. As Christ assumed our whole humanity and was broken to make us whole, Christ assumes the elements that are broken and poured. Christ is present in the bread. Christ is in our prayers in the sanctuary, Christ is in the hospital room, in the nursing home, in the delivery room, in the gathered church and Christ is in the bread blessed, broken, shared and eaten.

By His promise, Christ is here. "This is my body." This is my blood. I think this is what we mean by sacrament: Our best words, our best intentions, or our rock solid faith don't change the elements into anything else. But neither do our stumbling utterances, or our nagging doubts preclude Christ from being here. I think something special happens in the bread and something happens in the church when we gather around His table. When you come down the aisle, you aren't just you. You are part of something bigger than yourself. In a sermon, Augustine quoted this scripture passage, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually you are members of it." And then he said, "If that is so, it is the sacrament of yourselves that is placed on the Lord's table and it is the sacrament of yourselves that you are receiving."

And that's a mystery among mysteries. We pray for one another—how prayer works is a mystery, but it does.

Sometimes miracles happen for cures and for deep healing. How it happens we can't explain. The bread and cup are assumed by Christ's presence—how this happens is

a mystery but we believe it. A collection of individuals with diverse personalities, perspectives, histories, quirks, doubts, and faith become something more than ourselves—the body of Christ. Sinners become saints and the broken are made whole.

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