

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
By Eric Howell
“Holy Communion: Sacred Feast of the Church”
Luke 14:7-14
August 29, 2010

“If angels could be jealous of men, they would be so for one reason: Holy Communion.” That was said by the man whom Pope John Paul II called “the Patron Saint of Our Difficult Century.” St. Maximilian Kolbe was a Polish Conventual Franciscan friar who volunteered to die in place of a stranger in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. That was after he was arrested for hiding 2000 Jews from the Nazis. At Auschwitz he volunteered to take the place of a man who’d been chosen as 1 of 10 to be starved to death as a warning to the other prisoners. After three weeks Kolbe was the only survivor of the 10. They killed him by an injection of poison. Kolbe knew something of the significance of eating and sharing, and being denied these basic human experiences. He had shared communion enough times with others to see his life bound up with theirs as his brothers and sisters under God such that he could offer his life for one of theirs. He said of this meal: “If angels could be jealous of men, they would be so for one reason: Holy Communion.”

Communion is the sacred feast of the community gathered in the name of Jesus. And when you are a community that gathers to share in common the best and worst of life, and plenty of the mundane moments in between . . . when you are a community that comes together in the name of the Lord which calls forth our best and invites us each to come in the power of our Savior which welcomes our not-so-best . . . you are coming and partaking of that which is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” [Vatican II]

This is the sacred feast of the church. I’ve known folks before who didn’t take communion because they didn’t feel worthy to take it. I can understand that. There is scripture that calls us to be prepared and ready to receive this. I respect the seriousness with which those folks understood this moment. But, as far as I can tell, it’s a sad and lonely piety. The only one of us who isn’t worthy to receive Christ is the one who feels worthy to receive Christ. We aren’t worthy. We are shown mercy. Jesus says: “when you throw a feast, invite the poor. Don’t just invite your friends, relatives, and rich neighbors, but invite people who can’t return the favor.” Invite . . .

The poor -- people who worked daily for the bread they would eat that night if they were to eat. Many were beggars. It was life lived hand to mouth. In a deeper sense, you can have a big bank account and still be poor in life, still be in need. Some of us here today are probably poor in bank account. Some of us are no doubt poor in spirit, coming empty today in need of not just bread, but the Bread of Life.

The crippled and lame -- when these words show up together in scripture, they refer to hands and feet. It’s people who are crippled in their hands and lame in their feet. Whether you are crippled or lame in that society, you didn’t have much of a chance. No work, therefore no food and certainly no invitations to nice parties. You are probably poor. You are vulnerable. In a deeper sense, people are crippled in all kinds of ways. In the Bible crippled can also be translated “maimed,” to describe a

person who bears the scars of suffering at the hands of someone else. Some of us here have bodies that don't work the way we wish they did. Some of us have hearts that have been maimed by someone else -- a parent, friend, spouse, maybe the church itself. We come today in need of healing.

Invite the blind. The blind are people who can't see. I may be guessing, but Jesus seems to have a special place in his heart for people who can't see. He probably heals more blind people than anyone else. Some of us need sight today. We need direction, guidance to find our way in life. We not only can't seem to walk the straight and narrow; we can't even see where the road is. We need sight today.

The poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind -- physically, emotionally, and spiritually; people who always feel like everyone else here has their life together but me. People who have said things to themselves like, "If they knew about me -- what's true on the inside, they wouldn't be so quick to welcome me."

This is who Jesus came for. I think He knew what we cannot seem to sometimes admit. . . if only people who had it all together were admitted to the feast, everyone would go hungry. When Jesus was asked by some folks if He was the one they'd been waiting for, He said, "what do you see? The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have Good News preached to them." It is with Jesus exactly as Isaiah had prophesied it would be with the one they were waiting for, the Messiah from God. People who are hurting are welcomed and healed.

These are the people Jesus spent His time with; people whose lives on the outside betrayed their inner need for God rather than masking it. He ate with cheats and scoundrels, tax collectors and prostitutes, sinners of all kinds including the one who would betray Him. Jesus even served him bread and wine and washed his feet knowing what was hiding in Judas' heart.

And now Christ is the one who welcomes us to this table, to this feast we share this morning. Christ is the One who gives it the deep meaning beyond mere bread and wine: sustenance for our bodies. It is a feast for our souls -- His body broken and His blood shed -- the remembrance of His sacrifice, the retelling of the story of salvation, and the mystery of encountering the risen Christ here in bread and cup, and in giving and receiving as community. Christ has given this and invited us here.

If this is the feast and Christ is the host, who are we? Who are you when you come down the aisle and hold your hands to receive the Bread, the "Body broken for you?" [We're going to ask you to come this morning with your hands open and let the server place the bread in your hands as a gift from Christ that we are given by grace.] As you come down the aisle to receive this Bread and Cup, who are you that is coming? There are some folks who come to church thinking of how lucky God is that they came. God is fortunate that they are Christians, that they come to church. They are doing God, and certainly the other church members, a big favor just by showing up and participating. God's just fortunate to have me here.

Jesus tells a story about someone like that. "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself,

prayed: "God, I thank You that I am not like other men: extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice-a-week, I give tithes of all I get. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Notice how the self-righteous one is described as standing "by himself," and the confessing sinner is described as standing "far off." Both have taken a posture of isolating themselves from other people – one, because he's too good for other people, the other, because he's too bad for other people. Thanks to God for the church -- that we don't position ourselves away from one another because we are too good, or separate ourselves because we are too bad, but we all come in the name of Jesus Christ with all of our good that we can give, and all of our bad that we confess, and we bring it all together with one another.

We come as the poor, whose emptiness we ask to be filled by Christ.

We come as the broken, whose weakness we ask to be strengthened by Christ.

We come as the blind; we are lost and desire desperately to see clearly.

We come as lepers who are outcast, imprisoned who are stuck, thirsty and hungry who need to be filled, sick who need healing, naked who need comfort and security, afraid who need hope. Somewhere in each of us is this place that needs the touch of Jesus; that needs to be saved.

It is that place within us -- not the places we have it all together; not the place that we can give proudly to the cause of Christ. It's the broken place that is most welcome to the feast of Jesus Christ.

This morning as we come, we come as ones who are in poverty, in brokenness, in need of Christ. For communion this morning, we ask...

1. that you come when you are ready, not necessarily by rows. Usually we do communion row by row. Today, if you have to step over people who are still seated, so be it. You don't have to come row by row. Please come as you are ready. There's no pride in being first or being last. You just come. When we sense that everyone has come, we will draw the service to a close.

2. that when you come, you come with open hands. The server will place the bread in your hands as a sign of the filling of our souls that Christ effects. Communion is a gift we receive, not a right we take. Our open hands invite our open souls.

3. that you search your own heart about where you are today; when you come, you come with this prayer, "I am blind," or "I am crippled," or "I am lame," or "I am poor," or whatever else describes you this morning as a confession and prayer to God of the deepest spiritual need within you that you can acknowledge this morning. You are invited to hold this prayer close within you, but you are also invited to speak your prayer to the one who will serve you the bread. Your confession to the one who serves you is a confession and prayer to Christ and will be met by the promise, the gift, the salvation offered to you a long time ago and

renewed today by God's mercy, "Christ's body broken for you." "Christ's blood shed for you."

All of our worship is prayer. The remainder of our service will be a time of deeper prayer of self-examination, confession, and contemplative reflection on the love of God for us given in Jesus Christ. As the choir comes, let us listen for God's voice that we may know who we are even as we are known, loved, and saved by God.