

A Strange Proclamation

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 21, 2011, by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

The table is set. The meal is ready. Everyone gathers around and has a seat. What happens next is one of the most intimate moments of the evening meal at the Puckett house. Each person extends his or her hands to take hold of the hand of another. In this moment, the work and worries of each person's day connect. Some hands are cold, and weak, and clammy; some are warm, and strong, and rough. Each hand carries with it the memories, stresses, and joys of the day. Each hand also brings a familiarity, a history, a story marked in the hand's grooves, and prints, and scars. The stories represented by each person's hands are deeply intertwined with those sitting around the table. Extending the hand is a kind of peace offering, an act of reconciliation, a chance to restore relationships damaged since our last meal together. We do not begin until everyone is present. With our hands joined, someone gives thanks for the meal about to be shared. This scene has taken place countless times around innumerable tables in our family. The practice of offering our hands as we turn to God in thanksgiving has shaped and continues to shape our family's life together. This hand holding practice points toward something greater than our family meal.

In the popular film based on the life of Baltimore Ravens offensive lineman Michael Oher, a wealthy family in Memphis takes in and eventually adopts a poverty stricken young man. As is often the case, the family receives as much blessing from inviting Michael into their family as Michael receives from being part of theirs. In one particular scene, the action of the movie slows almost to a stop. It is Thanksgiving, and the family has gathered around the TV in their characteristic way to eat their holiday feast and watch football. Michael, neither use to having such a feast nor use to the family's habits, takes a seat at the dining room table. The mother sees Michael and realizes the family should join him. Once everyone is gathered, the family members offer their hands to one another before prayer. And in a poignant moment, as if he recognizes the intimacy, invitation, and hospitality of this act, Michael hesitates. Can he, a poor man with a troubled past, be part of this wealthy family? After a pregnant pause, the camera angle narrows to focus on two hands joining: the petite, delicate hand of a wealthy teen girl and the large, rough hand of a poor teen boy. In this moment, the actions around a holiday meal testify to something beyond the meal itself. The actions represent an invitation to a shared life, to a journey together, rooted in something deeper than the economic and sociological barriers between Michael and the family.

The film's Thanksgiving Day scene and the practice at my family's dinner table touch on something the Apostle Paul understood about the tradition of the Lord's Supper. What happens at the table makes a proclamation. It testifies to something. But the question is, "What or whom does it proclaim?" Paul was writing to a church that had not gotten it right around the table. If we look just a few verses before our Epistle reading, we encounter Paul condemning the Corinthian worship practices for doing more harm than good. The Corinthian church experienced a division between the have's and the have

not's. And the splits along lines of wealth showed themselves most egregiously in the practice of the Lord's Supper.

The Corinthians met in large houses owned by the wealthier and more socially influential members. In their meetings, they had uncritically adopted the dining conventions of their society. According to Roman dining custom, there were clearly first-class and second-class guests; a person was either one of the guests of honor or one of lower status. First class guests reclined in a spacious area enjoying the best food and drink the host had to offer. The second-class guests ate with the slaves and children in a crowded "overflow" room.

When the church gathered for worship, it mimicked this Roman pattern of gathering in its eating together. The wealthier and honored guests went ahead with their meal without waiting for others. They greedily devoured their food becoming drunk and leaving others to go hungry. To Paul this amounted to making the shared meal of worship into nothing more than a typical Roman social gathering. It was not the "Lord's Supper." It was their own. Paul chastised the Corinthians, as if to say, "Don't stamp the Lord's name on what you're doing together." To Paul, the meal the Corinthians shared proclaimed nothing of the God whom they worshipped in Christ. Their meal and their life together did not proclaim the Lord's death. Instead, the meal exposed the capitulation of the Corinthian community to the social status standards of their day. The meal testified to division rather than communion.

In response to their division, Paul reminded the Corinthians that the Lord's Supper declares something about God that made their actions around the table incomprehensible. The actions of breaking and pouring, of eating and drinking, of remembering Jesus being handed over are themselves a participation in and an announcing of the Lord's death. Any community gathered around the Lord's Supper makes this strange proclamation. That is to say, in the words and actions around the table, the community of faith demonstrates the gospel. Paul reminded the Corinthians that their participation in the Lord's Supper was meant to testify to the God who uses the foolishness of the cross as the sign of God's power for salvation. The Lord's death is God undermining the wisdom of the world through Jesus' self-emptying death on the cross. The Lord's death is God destroying the barriers to true fellowship with God and humanity. The Lord's death is Jesus giving himself up to set captives free. The Lord's death is God's power for communion with all people. The Lord's death is God reconciling the whole world to himself through the cross.

In his famous icon, Andrei Rublev carefully crafted an image of three angels to represent the three persons of the Holy Trinity. The three angels sit around a table, and in the center of the table sits a cup.¹ This is the cup of the new covenant in Christ's blood. The cup represents the Lord's death. The angels sit with their hands open, gesturing toward the cup. The icon depicts the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as an interaction around a table and the holy meal. The icon portrays a Trinitarian participation in the Lord's death. As Rublev imagined it, the best way to depict the

¹ See reflection on Andrei Rublev's icon by Michael Gallagher at <http://www.liturgy.co.nz/virtualchurch/rublevstrinity1.html>.

fellowship of the Trinity was to place them at a table, set with the meal that proclaims the Lord's death.

Rublev's icon, like Paul's challenge to the Corinthians, offers an invitation to participation in the Supper of the Lord. The icon is painted inviting the viewer to be part of the world within the icon. There is an opening at Rublev's table, a place for the viewer to join the fellowship and communion of the Trinity. Rublev's Trinitarian meal is an open invitation into intimacy and communion within the life of God. This meal is a proclamation of the gospel.

The Apostle Paul and Andrei Rublev point us to a similar truth: communing with God in the Lord's Supper is a proclamation in word and deed of Christ's reconciling death. When our words and actions reveal a kind of communion that is consistent with the communion of the Trinity, then our meals and our lives together are a participation in the divine life. They are an enactment of Holy Communion, an eating of the Lord's Supper wherever we are. When this is the case, our life together points beyond itself to the God revealed in Christ's act of giving his body and blood for us.

So we are left with a question: If the Lord's Supper is about proclaiming the gospel in our lives, what does it look like for us to make this proclamation? What does it look like for the community of faith to proclaim a life consistent with God's self-giving love revealed in the Lord's death? The Corinthian church gives us a negative example. From them, we know what it does not look like to proclaim the Lord's death. It does not look like a church separated along lines of social status or economics. It does not look like a church whose life is characterized by the self-interest of a few. It does not look like a divided church.

But a negative example is not enough. Let us consider Jesus' actions in the institution of the Supper for a few positive ones. Paul writes, "On the night in which Jesus was handed over, he took bread..." A church who proclaims the Lord's death in its body is marked by allowing itself to be handed over for God. Archbishop Oscar Romero lived in a time of political and social unrest in El Salvador. Romero detested the ways the Salvadorian government and the leadership of the Church disregarded the basic humanity of the poor. Over time, Romero and the body of Christ around him began speaking out against the injustices and oppression they saw. Romero and his church were aware that those in power had a way of silencing voices of dissent, and yet they continued to proclaim God's concern for the poor. Eventually, giving themselves over for the spread of the Gospel cost Romero and some of his friends their lives. Romero and his friends took their bodies and gave them as they proclaimed the Lord's death.

The liturgy of the Supper continues, "He gave thanks." A church who proclaims the Lord's death in its body is marked by thanksgiving. Beside the Matthew 25 House in Port-au-Prince Haiti, there lives a group of about 800 Haitians displaced by last year's earthquake. As maybe you can imagine, their bodies and their lives have been taken from them in the devastating effects of the earthquake. Even still, a group of about 50 Haitians who live in this tent encampment rise before the sun every morning to sing songs and pray prayers of thanksgiving and praise. While their thanksgiving does not ignore the fact that their lives have been broken and poured out, thanksgiving remains. United with each

other and God in thanksgiving, they proclaim the Lord's death while they await his return.

Finally, Jesus "broke the bread, saying, 'This is my body for you.'" A church who proclaims the Lord's death in its body is marked by being broken for others. In the rain forest of Beliz there is a poor, Christian community who makes its livelihood farming.² Farming in the rain forest is a precarious way to live. One evening, a robber broke into the peoples' homes while they were away, stealing the little money they had saved. The authorities were able to capture the man who robbed the community and sentenced him to a prison term. When his sentence was coming to an end, the church decided they needed to be prepared for the release of this criminal, so they got to work. When the man was released from prison, the community found him and greeted him with a gift. They broke their bodies for him by building him a house. With their bodies, this church shared in communion with this prisoner set free. And now in their communion with him, they proclaim the Lord's death.

Paul's words of institution to the Corinthians, end in this way: "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The question before us is, "What or whom will we proclaim?"

² Story found in *Jesus for President*, by Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw.