

Do This In Remembrance of Me
I Corinthians 11: 17-26

"Do this in remembrance of me."¹ Each time we come to the Lord's Table, we hear those words. When Paul's letter to the Corinthians was written, it had been over twenty years since Jesus' death. Those words, said by Jesus at his last supper with his disciples, were living on in Jesus' followers. Tradition has it that Jesus' last supper in the upper room took place in the context of a full meal, the Passover Seder, a ritual that was well over 1000 years old at that time. To ancient words, Jesus added, 'Take, eat, this is my body; take, drink, this is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.'² In doing so, he created a cornerstone of the Christian faith, this sacrament we call the Lord's Supper or Communion, an avenue of God's grace come to life.

Paul was not there that last night, but he knew the stories well. He was aware of the importance of those words to the believers of Jesus - and to the fledgling church as a whole. As one of the places he visited most often, he knew the people of Corinth well. He helped organize the churches there and watched as they enthusiastically embraced faith in Christ. Paul's letter to the Corinthians was one of love and encouragement, but it was also one of frustration. He was perplexed and perturbed; because as passionate as they had been at the beginning, it was falling apart now as the Christians in Corinth tried to conform their faith to the culture around them. As divisions arose, they began to lose focus on God. Reaching back to the past Paul used Jesus' words and reminded the Corinthians that what Jesus said was not only an invitation to remember, but they were also, and perhaps especially, an invitation to live. "Do this in remembrance of me."

Corinth at the time of Paul was a relatively young city but with a rich and long history. One of the largest and most vital cities in ancient Greece, it was demolished in 146 BC in the days when Rome was gaining strength and rebuilt a century later as a culturally diverse center of commerce. For the most part, its inhabitants were wealthy, and there was a sharp divide

¹ I Corinthians 11: 24b NRSV

² from Luke 22

between the haves and the have-nots, a cultural and economic dichotomy that was reflected in the Corinthian Christian practice of the Lord's Supper. For the new Christians of the first century, the Lord's Supper was always part of one of the regular meals of the day and not a separate ritual. It would not even fully become a part of worship until the fourth century under the Emperor Constantine. To the Corinthians who were turning the Lord's Supper into extravagant, exclusive feasts, Paul wrote:

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?³

Quite a scathing admonition! In spite of Paul's criticism, it was a division that only increased as the Church became a more influential political presence in the world, often neglecting the poor and vulnerable in favor of the wealthy and powerful. Even the rite of communion itself became the center of divisiveness with particular groups holding exclusive rights to the sacrament. Tables were 'fenced', barring participation to only those deemed worthy. It became the very opposite of what Jesus intended as it turned into a place where only the approved and like-minded could gather. Instead of something that united believers, communion became an exaggeration of the divisions of the church and was at risk of becoming no more than an empty ritual, merely reviving distant memories. Paul's words, which brought the ritual of the Lord's Supper to the core of faith as both unification and identity, still speak to us today of who we are to be as one in God.

"Do this in remembrance of me." Often viewed as words of memorial, Jesus' command took on a backwards perspective of looking back at the past - what Jesus said and did, who Jesus was. When we come together at this Table, we *do* remember. We recall 'on the night he was betrayed'. The prayer of great thanksgiving relates the history of God and God's people. We think of the death of Jesus. It *is* a memorial. Paul reminded the people in Corinth that the

³ | Corinthians 11: 20-21, 22b NRSV

meal they shared was more than a recollection of memories. Paul instructed the Corinthians in his letter that the Holy Meal, the Lord's Supper, was intended to be an expression of the unity as God's people, not a reflection of the differences created by culture and society. It was a reflection of life in Christ, not just recalling memories of the past. It was their identity, the center around which their faith was formed and the hub from which life flowed.

In the television series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Captain Jean Luc Picard would issue an order with the words, 'Make it so.' Take an idea, a concept, and turn it into reality. Jesus' command, 'do this in remembrance of me,' is a lot more like Picard's 'make it so' than an instruction for a memorial observance. Sharing in the Lord's Supper, as it was becoming known in the emerging Church of the first century, was also the means by which the message of Jesus Christ would continue to live. In Paul's view, to have economic disparity take shape in this holy meal was counter to what Jesus said and did, opposing why Jesus lived and died. For some to revel in lavish feasts while others had only meager meals, for divisions to gather at opposite sides of the table - all in the name of Jesus - was decidedly *not* the heart of the gospel. As with the Corinthians, the focus of remembering was not to stay stuck in the vestiges of the past but to propel us forward to the time when "at last, all peoples will be free, all divisions healed."⁴ The Table is not a memorial service we repeat time and time again but a declaration of who we are and who we can be as the people of God. To come to this Table is to ground us in the reality of God's call on our lives.

We, like generations before us, have been here at this Table previously. We will be here again. We hear words ingrained in our hearts, words many of us have heard all our lives. There is power in repeated words and actions of ritual comforting us that there are parts of our living on which we can depend. Equally present in the ancient and sacred rite is the power to move us forward, to become people created in God's own image, to find the best of ourselves.

⁴ Great Thanksgiving E (prepared by the International Committee on English in the Liturgy) as found in the *Book of Common Worship*. Theology and Worship Ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

Though there are variations from one faith tradition to another, even within individual congregations, at the core of each observance is a ritual that tells us that life as a believer is not so much who we are as individuals but who we are together as the Body of Christ. Its richly simple tradition weaves us together with others in the world, with voices from the past, with others who are yet to walk this earth. It might be only bread and juice, but it is potent affirmation that we are one, that we share a common faith, that God's love is more powerful than all our differences.

"Do this in remembrance of me." The words were never meant to be Jesus' words of comfort to his disciples before he died. The Greek word *ἀνάμνησιν*, the one used by Jesus and the same one used by Paul, is used rarely in the New Testament. There are other words more commonly employed when referring to remembering or memories. Its meaning is powerfully unique, for its message is to remember in such a way that the past comes to life. That is what we do here at this Table. We remember that God calls each of us to life in a particular fashion, to be one even though the world does its best to pull us apart, to be a people crafted in God's own image. When we come to this Table, we discover "a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world."⁵ We see the hurt and pain, the inequities, the cruelty - and we see the God who brings us all together with healing grace. Having been touched by God's love, we can then turn to do and be the same for others. We 'make it so' for the world.

Sometimes I don't know how to live as 'one'. I don't know how to reach across divides that seem so vast. I question whether such a feat is even possible for anyone. Yet I come here and say that words that still make my soul tremble. My heart awakens with memories of times past when I have been at other Tables. Somehow, hope always springs up from a source I cannot create on my own to soothe the pain of differences and divisions and build an image of the kingdom of God. We can make it so. We can make our faith a reality in which all are

⁵ Alexander Schmemmann. *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. 1973.

welcome, all are cared for, all are loved. Coming together to share in the communion meal is our beginning, our tentative effort to acknowledge that we are in this together, caught up in a dance of God's love, grace, and justice. These words, these actions, this meal make us fully human. They also make us holy.

"Do this in remembrance of me." Those words speak to the heart of who we are. We are the living, breathing presence of God in this world. What we say and do tells others who God is. That is a weighty thought. When we leave here today, after having shared in this meal, it is with the firm and certain knowledge that we can make it so, we can be the people of God. As the bread and the cup are passed around today, remember. Remember in such a way that the love of God becomes reality for the world. Amen.

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