

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Sunday, August 16, 2009
Rev. William L. Love

WHOEVER PARTAKES OF CHRIST

1 Kings 2:10-12
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58

When I was growing up, I did not worry particularly about what I would do to make a living. It seemed to me that people worked at jobs and earned a living. Whether it was at this job or that did not seem important. What seemed important to me then – and I learned this from watching my father – what seemed important was to be a good husband and a good father.

As I grew up, I learned that life is not quite as simple as it seemed as a child. The real world is not necessarily loving and supportive. The mere fact of our existence does not necessarily accord us any status in the world as it does in the family.

As I grew up, I looked at the world. And I thought about what I saw.

It seemed to me that it is an awesome responsibility to bring a child into this world. What kind of world is this? What kind of world will it be?

It seemed to me that life is as full of danger as safety, as full of disappointment as joy, the good guys do not always win. We have the technology to destroy all that generations have created, and, in the end, everyone dies.

Would bringing a child into this world be as much an act of cruelty as it is an act of love?

I talked with my father about this. I don't suppose I thought that other generations worried about it. My father said that he had worried about it. When he and my mother married, Hitler had risen to power in Germany. Within months, Europe was at war. Charles, the older of my brothers, was not quite two years old when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

At the end of World War II, my father (in uniform) was walking with Charles. A stranger stopped them and said to Daddy, *You fought this war; he'll fight the next one.* Charles enlisted in the Air Force about the time that Americans were beginning to die in Vietnam.

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King David brought children into this world.

He had desired Bathsheba, brought Uriah back from the front to cover his adultery when Bathsheba became pregnant, had Uriah killed when he kept his soldier's vow not to lie with his wife while his comrades were in battle. David had responded to the prophet Nathan's parable by saying that such actions deserved death. He had watched that child die.

One of his children Amnon had raped his half-sister Tamar. Her brother Absalom had avenged her rape by killing Amnon. Absalom then rebelled against David, raising an army and going to war to overthrow David. Even then, David was too soft-hearted or soft-headed. He ordered that no harm should come to Absalom.

His general Joab treated Absalom as an enemy and killed him, saving David and his followers from the same fate at Absalom's hands.

When the word reached David, he grieved to the depths of his soul and in every joint of his body. He wept, *O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son.*

* * *

When William Sloane Coffin's son Alex died, he said: *After the death of his wife, C. S. Lewis wrote, "They say, 'The coward dies many times'; so does the beloved." ... When parents die, as did my mother last month, they take with them a large portion of the past. But when children die, they take away the future as well. That is what makes the valley of the shadow of death seem so incredibly dark and unending. In a prideful way it would be easier to walk the valley alone, nobly, head high, instead of – as we must – marching as the latest recruit in the world's army of the bereaved.* [Coffin, **The Courage to Love**, 96]

WHOEVER PARTAKES OF CHRIST — 2

O my son! Would I had died instead of you, my son, my son.

* * *

Of David's children, only Solomon seems to have gotten it right when he prays for wisdom rather than riches. He will later bring pagan worship into the Temple and sow the seeds which would bear the fruit of a divided kingdom.

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In Ephesians, Paul writes: *Look carefully then how you walk, not unwisely but wisely, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ... And do not get drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit.* [Eph. 5:15-16,18]

Apparently, some in the church were using wine as an aid to their spiritual experience. Or as a substitute for it. The effects were of the wine more immediate, certain, and dependable.

LSD was first used in mental hospitals to enable patients to break through psychological barriers when other methods had failed. Advocates of its use argued for its mind-expanding properties that allowed users to reach new levels of consciousness.

Its use was born of a desire to escape reality which substances from the wine of Ephesus to those of today have sought.

Beyond escape **from** reality, they may seek to escape **to** a place where the user is at one with the ground of all being. They seek to induce [mechanically and artificially] a mystical experience – rather than to face reality and go through its suffering to find in the thick of it or out of the thick of it that *mystic sweet communion* [Charles Wesley] with God.

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In the gospel of John, Jesus is talking with the religious authorities. When Jesus tried to tell them about the Bread of Life, they protested, *Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "God gave them bread from heaven to eat."* [Jn. 6:31]

The religious leaders were clinging to old religious forms that had lost their creative power in their lives. The manna was given to a wilderness, nomadic, pilgrim people, who would have died without it. They were a settled culture that grew crops and made their own bread.

The symbols which profoundly moved their ancestors and which expressed symbolically their experience of God had seemingly lost their power to energize the religious authorities. Instead, they substituted the minutiae of a rigid ethical system and failed to see their own hunger or the Bread of Life in their midst. Theirs was a God of the past.

And our Christian traditions are as well at risk of becoming irrelevant – at risk of becoming a simple nostalgia for the past – unable to set free the liberating power of the gospel for us as we face the future.

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As I was talking with my father, I told him I worried about what kind of world it will be. An adjunct to that is to be concerned about whether there will be a world.

In my second pastorate in an adult church school class, a member of the class and I were talking about an issue raised in the discussion. We were having some difficulty communicating because we seemed to have different assumptions.

It occurred to me that, basic to our different assumptions, was that he had lived his formative years prior to the Nuclear Age, and I have lived all my life since the advent of the Nuclear Age.

I have talked with one of the scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project – who told of those scientists who were not told but who knew what they were working on. And knowing the immense potential for destruction that would be unleashed from Uranium 235, they would for years have stress reactions if they saw the numbers 2, 3, 5 in sequence.

Before the Nuclear Age, there was the assumption that there was a continuity (of which humanity was a meaningful part) between the past, present, and future. With the Nuclear Age

(and its power to destroy), that continuity is broken. For the first time, the future is optional.

The demise of the Soviet Union has removed that source of threat but has given us Iraq and the fear of weapons of mass destruction and Iran and North Korea as potential nuclear threats with Eastern Europe less stable and the parts of the former Soviet nuclear arsenal still dangerously intact. India and Pakistan have joined the nuclear powers with perhaps more enmity toward each other than wisdom about the power they possess.

And there is the terrorism that is not limited to Northern Ireland or the Middle East but comes as close as the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11, the federal building in Oklahoma City, the Olympics in Atlanta, or abortion clinics virtually anywhere.

More personal, more immediate than international threats is the fear we increasingly live with everyday, every time we leave our homes, and that is the fear of crime and being a random victim to whatever degree of violence, such as April 16, 2007. Many have armed themselves, keeping weapons in their homes, with the greater probability being that the weapon will be used against them rather than protecting them.

And the children who simply do not believe that they will grow up, that they will die before they reach adulthood – which for them is as tragic and hopeless as the fear of nuclear conflagration. Like the young man who wrote President Clinton shortly before being shot to death. Or like those who so despair for the future that any means to get it all or escape from it all now seems justified.

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There is a story from ancient India:

Four royal sons were questioning what specialty they should master. They said to one another, "Let us search the earth and learn a special science." So they decided, and after each had agreed on a place where they would meet again, the four brothers started off, each in a different direction. Time went by, and the brothers met again at the appointed meeting place, and they asked one another what they had learned. "I have mastered a science," said the first, "which makes it possible for me, if I have nothing but a piece of bone of some creature, to create straightaway the flesh that goes with it." "I," said the second, "know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones." The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have the flesh, the skin, and the hair." "And I," concluded the fourth, "know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete with limbs."

*Thereupon the four brothers went into the jungle to find a piece of bone so that they could demonstrate their specialties. As fate would have it, the bone they found was a lion's, but they did not know that and picked up the bone. One added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life. Shaking its heavy mane, the ferocious beast arose with its menacing mouth, sharp teeth, and merciless claws and jumped on his creators. He killed them all and vanished contentedly into the jungle. [J. A. B. van Bristensen, trans., *Tales of Ancient India* in Nouwen, **The Wounded Healer**, 5-6]*

It seems that we are not the first to be capable of creating the means of our own destruction – though the scale on which we can do it has changed. Most of our wounds are self-inflicted; most of our troubles are self-induced.

And therein lies something of the problem. One common thread running through David's grief at Absalom's death, the Ephesians' seeking an artificially induced spiritual experience, the religious authorities' clinging to symbols that no longer meet needs, and all the contemporary expressions of our spiritual hunger – one common thread is the suspicion of meaninglessness.

The way William Butler Yeats described it is:

*Turning and turning in widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;*

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*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Yeats, *The Second Coming*

The fear that the center cannot hold – that we like the falcon cannot hear our falconer, who is God (perhaps the fear that God cannot hear us, perhaps that it makes no difference).

* * *

To this Jesus says: *Unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life. Whoever partakes of me will live.*

Taken literally that sounds like cannibalism. But Jesus is talking in forms we are not used to hearing. This is the language our biblical ancestors used to express their deepest experiences: grief, remorse, repentance, devotion, love, and joy of life. We tend to think of these as emotions and associate them with the heart. The ancients used the metaphors of bone and breath and flesh and marrow and joints.

Jesus speaks of partaking of him in a way that goes beyond emotion to reach every fiber of our being – to reach our flesh and our blood – to affect our inner Self and our outer self.

To eat Jesus' flesh and to drink Jesus' blood is to be embraced by Jesus in an experience that lesser descriptions do not express. It goes even beyond the limits of this startling description. It goes beyond words.

For it is the crucifixion – in which Jesus took into himself all human sinfulness and suffering and endured the pain of human life.

It is the resurrection – in which we are given life again by God as it was given by God in the beginning – to love God and to enjoy God forever.

To eat and drink of Christ is both. The crucifixion cannot be avoided. To partake of Christ is to know the suffering as well as the joy.

The center does hold. We can hear our falconer.

We meet Christ in our inner life, as we seek to find a connection with God (the source of our being, *the still point in a turning world* [Eliot]). We will find that the things that are the most personal are the most universal. Beyond the superficial distinctions, idiosyncracies, psychological and sociological differences that we use to justify our separation, we will find a common humanity in which we are connected with all other beings. We can love our neighbor as ourselves because we have found that our neighbors and we are one. We can love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, for we will find that our enemies and we are one.

We will meet Christ in our life in the world. We can find that neither Hiroshima nor 9/11 nor a back alley nor a street corner nor the broken home nor the broken life is necessarily the foreshadowing of our end. We can envision a new world in which salvation is at least as much a possibility as total destruction, in which a new humanity is at least as much a possibility as the old humanity.

Partaking of Christ, we are connected with that power to redeem not only the human souls but also the human society (whether that society is as small as two people or a family or as large as the world).

Jesus did not retreat from the ills of the souls nor the ills of society. Neither can we.

In the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus made whole our fragmented self and our fragmented world.

Partaking of Christ is our participation with our flesh and blood, our body and spirit, our

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inner Self and our outer life in all that Christ has done and is doing.

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There is a Christmas hymn which speaks of our dilemma and Christ's participation with us. It says:

*O come to the manger of Bethlehem
And visit the new-born Child.
O come to the manger to gaze at him.
He looks so meek and so mild.
For unto us a child is born;
To us is given a son.
What lies ahead, sweet innocent Child,
Before Your life will be done?*

*Both Mary and Joseph await the time
When he'll go away from them
To face all the fears that each life confronts
And hear his own requiem.
For unto us a child is born;
To us is given a son.
What lies ahead, sweet innocent Child,
Before Your life will be done?*

*Know, all of you parents across the earth
With children who sleep serene,
They'll face the unknown, unsuspected hurts
With faith or fear as they've seen.
For unto us are children born;
To us are giv'n little ones.
What lies ahead for these precious lives
Before their course is all run?*

*We cannot protect them, nor did our God
Safeguard from the cross the Child
In Whom we can find both Savior and friend
When living has us beguiled.
For unto us a child is born;
To us is given a son,
Who comes as infant born in the night
To die and rise with life won.*

*O come to the manger of Bethlehem;
See Infant not meek nor mild.
His work is the cross, for this he was born;
By this we are reconciled.
For unto us a child is born;
To us is given a son.
This lies ahead, O Infant Divine,
Before Your work will be done.*

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WHOEVER PARTAKES OF CHRIST — 6

Jesus said, *I am the living bread which came down from heaven, and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh...so whoever partakes of me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as our ancestors ate and died; whoever eats this bread will live...*

The psalmist said, *Taste, and see that the Lord is good.*