

The Colors of Faith: Red

March 16, 2014

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

17 But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. 18 For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, 19 for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. 20 When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. 22 What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. 23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. 31 But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. 32 But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world. 33 So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another-- 34 if any one is hungry, let him eat at home--lest you come together to be condemned. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

This is the second Sunday in our Lenten study of the colors of faith. Today we are focusing on the color Red. Red is the color of ruby slippers, lips, roses, strawberries, stop signs, apples. It is a color that is associated with passion, with happiness and good fortune. For example while we in our culture typically wear a white wedding dress many cultures wear red. Red alongside Green reminds us of Christmas. It is also a color that reminds us of danger, sacrifice, and blood.

Blood is a part of life. Leviticus 17:11 says "the life of a creature is in its blood". If you hold out your hand you can see the veins that carry blood to all parts of your body. It was understood by the ancients to be sacred both a bringer of life as in the case of childbirth and a precursor to death. Women were both feared and revered because they lost blood and yet still lived. Blood was mystical and considered magical it was an important part of sacrifice and worship. It was also part of who we were, our bloodlines, where we came from and who we became were often decided because of our blood. These ancient and even more recent understandings affect and influence some of our own associations with blood.

Blood, particularly the blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is one way we come to understand the depth of God's love for us as the beloved people of God. That depth of love and the sacrifice it led to in death by crucifixion is why we are reading and understanding a bit more today about a central part of our worship service as Disciples of Christ. The Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, Holy Communion. These words of Paul to the people of Corinth about the Lord's Supper are significant for a variety of reasons.

One such reason is the language of the letter. We have to understand that Paul's letters were written to the early Christians as a way of voicing praises and concerns for how they were living out their new calling in faith. These early Christians did not have the entirety of the Gospels to go by. They just had the teachings of the various apostles particularly Paul. In fact we need to keep it in the back of minds that the First Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, was written around 70 A.D. and the first letter to the people of Corinth was written around 55 A.D. The written out scriptures that we know today were oral during the time of early Christianity. That is why in our reading and re-reading we have to be aware of the historical context.

This awareness of the historical context is a form of literary dissection called historical criticism. This is not as many biblical fundamentalist would state saying that the scripture is not the word of God because we are viewing it through

the historical context. It is, however, a way of recognizing that the truth of God is prophetic and adaptable to our context today. In other words we may not be in biblical times but God's voice and word is still profound and applicable even if we cannot find the exact situation in the bible. The Good News will always preach.

Part of that Good News is that the red blood of Christ was enough to mend our relationship with God. Recall that we as God's people had been separated from God since the time when Adam and Eve ate of the apple. From that time the people of God were constantly trying to atone and mend their relationship. Atone is an interesting theological word because it means to repent of our sins so that we can be at one with God again.

Through the ages God has given chance after chance for us to be at one with God again and again. Abraham, Israel, Joseph, Moses and the Ten Commandments, Joshua, the Prophets all were part of the numerous chances we the people have had to be at one with God. Finally God sent Jesus God's own beloved son to be the last chance. With Jesus God used the most poignant display of love a sacrifice of blood.

Remember the story of Abraham, Isaac, and the ram. Where God asks Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son to show Abraham's love of God. Abraham does all he can to prepare and then God sends the lamb to be the sacrifice instead. That is all it is about is it not? God sends the lamb to be the sacrifice of blood instead.

So Paul writes to the people of Corinth and he is helping them in their new found faith. He writes to them because he has heard of their dissention regarding the practices of their worship particularly the practices of the Lord's Supper. While for us it is a formalized ritual and remembrance. Paul's letter is actually the first to designate this central part of our worship as the Lord's Supper. It is the only time in the New Testament that the last supper meal is given a different name.

It is also not understood by early Christians as a liturgical practice of worship in the same sense we understand it today. Christ remember changed a regular meal by taking two elements of that meal and utilizing them as metaphorical symbols of remembrance. Some scholars will differentiate this by calling the elements from the meal part of the 'love feast' and what we liturgically practice the Eucharist.

Some faith denominations practice what is known as transubstantiation which is where the bread and wine are not merely symbols but through the sacramental rites become the actual body and blood of Christ. We as Disciples of Christ practice that the bread and the wine or in our case the juice are symbolic representations of the blood and body of Christ. In our theological understanding we view the meal as both sacrament and ordinance. Sacramental in that it is a sacred act of divine worship, ordinance in that it is an expression of understanding and obedience to the teachings of Christ. The line between sacrament and ordinance was at one time more distinct but in practice as our faith continues to evolve the distinction is blurring.

Both interpretations of the meal understanding play a role in how we worship. As Disciples of Christ we are one of the few faith denominations to partake of the Lord's Supper ever Sunday. Catholics are another. Baptist and Methodist partake once a month or sometimes even quarterly. Others only partake on Holy Days like Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas. And still others practice twice monthly or yearly or in a variety of ways dependent on their beliefs. However it is taken communion along with baptism are recognized across the board as important sacraments to the practice of our faith.

Some of this importance is because of this letter of Paul to the Corinthians. Paul however is addressing in particular a couple of things about the table that we can also learn from today. The people of Corinth were creating divisions about the table which was then celebrated as more of a feast meal than how we understand it now. In this feast meal divisions were made; divisions of class and wealth and place that said certain people received more or better than others because of who they were. As the people met in private homes and not public spaces like our beautiful sanctuary these divisions were more easily accomplished.

Paul by highlighting the meal as the Supper of our Lord is rebuking the people of Corinth to recall that this meal is not about them but about remembering our Lord and his sacrifice of blood and body for us to be at one with God. Christ was

not about divisions but about inclusion of all to the table. One of our own founding fathers, Alexander Campbell, found this same issue and problem in the Presbyterian faith where you had to have a token that said you were a baptized member before partaking of the meal and is part of why we as Disciples practice communion as we do with the table open to all who believe.

And that my friends is what it comes down to, all who believe that the broken body and the red blood of our savior were worth something, worth enough to put our relationship with God to rights if only we choose to affirm and accept it.

There is an old hymn "Nothing but the Blood of Jesus"

Perhaps you know it but the words go:

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Refrain

*Oh! precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

For my pardon, this I see,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
For my cleansing this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Refrain

Nothing can for sin atone,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
Naught of good that I have done,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Refrain

This is all my hope and peace,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
This is all my righteousness,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Refrain

Now by this I'll overcome—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus,
Now by this I'll reach my home—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Refrain

Glory! Glory! This I sing—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus,
All my praise for this I bring—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Refrain

The preciousness of our lives is best understood through the death of God's son. Nothing we can do, no laws could we practice, not one or a thousand good deeds or works or acts of penitence are enough. Our relationship is so precious, we are so beloved by God that nothing but the red, red blood and the crucified body of Jesus was a good enough sacrifice to put us at one with God. It took death, and more than just dying but the sacrifice of blood so that we might have eternal life. Amen.