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The Sacrament of Communion (Matthew 5: 21-24)

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Tonight is our first service of Holy Communion for the year. It's one of the tragic ironies of the church that this sacrament of Communion – instituted by Jesus as a sign of the possibility of our *oneness* with God and one another – has become instead the most visible sign of Christian dis-union. The politics of who can celebrate the Eucharist, who can receive from whom, differences about what it all means and even what we call it (Eucharist, Communion, Mass, the Lord's Supper) occupy a vast amount of energy, and can cause a great deal of distress. For many of us, these debates reflect fairly abstruse theological concerns, which we've inherited from very different historical circumstances. Nevertheless, as you know, they can still have profound practical implications for the possibility of shared worship among Christians of different denominations.

Ecumenical communities can respond to the official impasse about all this in various ways. Some decide not even to go there, worshipping entirely non-Eucharistically. Chemin Neuf – an ecumenical new monastic community – has developed a liturgy of what you might call unconsummated communion: they bring the bread and wine to the altar, but do not proceed to consecrate and share them. It's their way of highlighting the need to continue to work for Christian unity, and of making visible the pain of disunity. They speak about 'unfinished work of the Reformation' and their vocation to share in completing that work.

At Benedictus, as a community whose prayer and spirituality is sourced in the pre-Reformation traditions of the desert monastics and Celtic Christianity, we've taken a different approach. Rather than waiting for official resolution of differences, our practice is to have an open table so that all who feel themselves free and called to participate may do so. I recognize this is not a complete response to our historical

situation – but, in an imperfect world, this seems to me the response most consistent with our vocation as an ecumenical contemplative church. And so, as we prepare to celebrate our first Communion of the year together, it seems a good time reflect a little about the meaning of this sacrament, and how it's connected with the kind of life Jesus calls us into.

The shape of the ritual action of Communion is, like the shape of baptism, a movement of transition from one form of life to another.¹ In the course of the communion liturgy, we move (symbolically at least) from a state of alienation and disconnection to a state of at-onement or communion. We move from death to life. That's a pretty big movement! How is it effected?

Historically and symbolically, the tradition of the Lord's Supper is connected to the Jewish Passover. Historically – because in three of the four gospels, it's remembered that Jesus instituted this ritual while sharing the Passover meal with his disciples. Symbolically, because it evokes what is celebrated at Passover – which is the passage made by the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to new life in the promised land, and the emergence of Israel as a new people called into a particular, covenant relationship with God. By drawing on and reworking the symbolic elements of this Passover meal, Jesus communicated how he understood his own meaning. It's as if he was saying, there's a new Passover occurring, one that will be accomplished by my death, and sealed as a new covenant in my blood. On the other side of this passage, there will come into being a new people – whose life together (just as the life of the people of Israel was intended to do) will manifest God's life in the world.

We can see the symbolic resonance and richness of this. But it seems a long way removed from us. What is it about this ritual meal that matters still? How is it an empowerment, an enabling of *our* movement from alienation to communion, from slavery to freedom?

¹ See Rowan Williams, 'Sacraments of the New Society' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.209-221, p.209.

Let's start with the question of alienation. In the Christian imagination, the default, the natural condition of humanity is a condition of being alienated – of not being at home with ourselves, with others and with God. Rowan Williams suggests that this state of alienation is a consequence of the failure of trust. It arises from our inability to trust in the faithfulness of God, to *depend* on the source of our life.² This isn't usually conscious – we don't *decide* not to trust. But notice how we're always trying to be in control, to justify ourselves, to keep ourselves safe. The fact that we do this is the evidence that we are in fact not trusting ourselves to God, that we're failing to receive our lives non-graspingly as gift. And this failure of trust in the source of our own existence leads us inevitably into relations of hostility, rivalry and defensiveness with one another. The whole shape of Jesus' life showed the possibility of a different way of being human, the possibility of a life that is fundamentally unthreatened because radically entrusted to and received from God.

At one level, then, Jesus' way of being functions like a sign for us – he points to, signals the trustworthiness of God *and* he shows what a human life truly entrusted to God looks like, 'how a human biography formed by God' shows up.³ And, at another level, he acts to bring about that possibility in the lives of others. *Through* him, because of his complete openness to God, a new freedom and creativity comes into the world and begins to reshape it. People are healed, reconciled, restored to themselves. So Jesus not only reveals but also realizes the life of God on earth; he begins to make actual the possible community of a new people, a new humanity. He is thus, Williams writes, 'an effective sign, a converting sign'⁴ – which is what a sacrament is – something that brings about the reality it signifies. Jesus is the sacrament of God.

If this is what Jesus' whole life is about, what happens at the Last Supper is part of the final signification and realization of this vocation. On the one hand, Jesus signifies his total entrusting, his total handing over of himself by identifying himself

² Williams, 'Sacraments of the New Society', p.215.

³ Rowan Williams, 'The Nature of a Sacrament' in *On Christian Theology*, pp.197-208, p.204.

⁴ Williams, 'The Nature of a Sacrament', p.205.

with the bread and wine which are to be consumed by his companions. 'By resigning himself into the signs of food and drink', Williams writes, 'putting himself into the hands of other agents, he signifies his forthcoming helplessness and death'.⁵ And by his willingness to undergo this suffering, without being determined by it, Jesus demonstrates that the love and life of God breaks through the power of death and non-being. For the disciples, witnessing this total self-offering brings about faith – and the creation of a new people who can entrust themselves comprehensively to God as Jesus did.

Of course, at the event of the Last Supper, it didn't much look like that would be the result. The disciples then are on the brink of being scattered. They're at odds with one another, terrified, about to betray and desert their Lord. Yet Jesus gives himself into their hands anyway. And what this means is that their failure, betrayal, and desertion is 'pre-forgiven', accepted in advance. It means that the new covenant in his blood, the renewed relationship with God brought about by his passion, does not depend on the disciples' faithfulness. It's just gift, it's given. Despite everything that is to come Jesus treats the disciples as his guests, 'recipients of an unending divine hospitality'.⁶ And it is precisely because of this hospitality and graciousness, because there is no conditionality in God's love, that the disciples are ultimately set free to forgive as they are forgiven, to release one another from debt and from destructive relations of vengeance and guilt.

When we celebrate communion, this is the dynamic we enter into – it's the faith we enact. We acknowledge our alienation, our need of being reconciled, our own likelihood to fail in trust. That's why we come having confessed our brokenness, and why we remind ourselves that all this happened 'on the night Jesus was betrayed'. Then we remember how Jesus lived and what he said – how he handed himself over in bread and wine, how he handed himself over to his betrayers and accusers and ultimately to death, in order to set us free. And we become guests, we

⁵ Williams, 'Sacraments of the New Society', p.216.

⁶ Williams, 'Sacraments of the New Society', p.216.

eat and drink, we receive this divine hospitality. As we do so, we become what we eat (so to speak); we are drawn to participate in Jesus' way of being – bearers of forgiveness and divine hospitality in our turn. We go back into the world in the power of his Spirit to help realise in our context this way of mercy and love.

And it's in this light, in the light of the new lives made possible by this movement of trust and grace, that tonight's reading from Matthew's gospel is properly heard. Because I *can* hear the injunction not only not to murder, but not to nurse anger against another, as little more than the intensification of obligation. It's all about trying a lot harder to be even more virtuous than the ancient law requires. But the deeper truth is that as we are liberated into the new humanity, the new creation that Jesus opens up for us, the more in fact new ways of being just start to flow forth. Of course, this isn't magic, any more than the sacrament of holy communion is magic; it doesn't mean there's no effort involved in biting our tongue, letting go grudges, giving up self-justification, disciplining our desires, and so on. But the more we know ourselves as forgiven *our* distrust and fear, freed to receive the gift of our lives, the more we see one another as 'fragile fellow creatures held in the love of God' – easier to forgive, easier to love. And *this* is the true meaning and consummation of the holy communion which this sacrament both signifies and realizes among us.