
Do This in Memory of Me!

A sermon by the Rev. Ricardo Bailey
Lent 4 – Year B

It has always been a source of homiletical preparation that one can use the opening prayer – or, in our case as Episcopalians, the Collect – as a means to give us direction as to understand the meaning of the assigned readings for a particular Sunday. Following the good example of the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith, I will ask us to listen attentively once again to the opening collect – or opening prayer for this Fourth Sunday of Lent:

“Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him;”

However, from listening to the Gospel for this Sunday, there are not any explicit Eucharistic parallels. We heard this morning one of the many famous verses from the Gospel of John:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

I would submit that almost every person on earth – believer and non-believer alike – have heard this verse. As a matter of fact, we’ve seen the chapter and verse at every baseball game, hockey game, football game – John 3:16! Some of the most recognizable numbers in the English-speaking world! However, there is an unfortunate practice within Christendom and that is to look at one verse and not see the whole context of the passage. Listen to John 3:17....

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Now, I can preach!

When I was ordained a priest on June 3, 2003 at the Cathedral right across the street, I was told these words at the end of the ordination rite when the Archbishop of Atlanta placed a chalice filled with wine and a paten with bread on it into my hands:

“Receive the oblation of the holy people, to be offered to God. Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord’s cross.” (Roman Pontifical, Rites of Ordination – USCCB, 2000.)

All of us who are ordained as priests in this sanctuary are priests because first and foremost we believe that we have been called by God to serve his people within this faith tradition. We are priests so that we can teach all of God’s people. We are priests so that we can lead God’s people to closer to him. We are priests so that we can lead God’s people closer to holiness through our personal pilgrimage of faith.

Many of you have heard me say in one time or another how happy and how blessed I feel to be an active priest once again. Having a wife, children, a job, and a parish where I am able to grow in holiness with all of you is truly an honor and a blessing. However, I feel that God didn’t call me or any of my sisters and brothers with whom I share ministry of

priesthood with so that we can be “judge and jury” to anyone or their suitability to receive the divine presence of Jesus in the celebration of the Eucharist!

The celebration and act of reception of the Eucharist serves as a means for everyone – and I mean EVERYONE – is to have a foretaste of heaven right here on earth! When Jesus told his apostles and those gathered with him in that upper room on Mount Zion over 2000 years ago to “Do this in memory of me,” Jesus was not only illustrating an action but he wanted to establish a new tradition and that was to be a tradition of acceptance, mercy, and total availability of his Church to humanity. The Eucharist IS the legacy of Jesus and as the Church, we must make certain that all are accepted and are fed with this gift that has been entrusted to the Church! So, if the celebration of the Eucharist is to express the real presence of Jesus in the reception of the sacrament, then let us be honest with one another and break this down:

God so loved the world and God gave us the gift of his son, Jesus! The saving mission of Jesus was to announce that the Kingdom of God was very imminent and in most cases, right in front of people! It was Jesus’ mission and legacy to make his message inclusive and available to all who had ears to hear and a heart to accept it! That means, it is the mission of the Church – especially in her teaching and celebration of the Sacraments – to truly and authentically make the message and mission of Jesus totally available for every person – no matter the issues, no matter the drama, and no matter the mess that we can bring to the situation.

That is why our opening prayer for this Sunday NOW makes sense to me because the prayer expresses the fact that Jesus is the “true bread” that has come from Heaven for the spiritual nourishment of the world. The Eucharist, or the celebration of Holy Communion, is supposed to be an expression of the unity and the charity that we are supposed to have as the Church of Jesus Christ!

Church folks need to stop playing games with the generosity of God! The problem that many folks on the streets of the real world have with us Church folks is that when they hear the living word of God broken open for them, it is a word of authentic liberation, acceptance, and forgiveness. However, when these sisters and brothers come into our Churches on any given Sunday, they can see and sense that it’s a totally different case and story when it comes to being with us. As a priest, I have always felt that I was a steward of the sacraments of the Church – especially when it comes to the Eucharist! I have news for you this morning:

I am a sinner!
I am not a perfect Christian!
I come short of the Glory of God many times!
I am impatient!
Get on my nerves, and I will get an attitude!

But, I would be devastated to know that in my shortcomings and imperfections, that Jesus would be through with me and totally cut me off! However, I am encouraged to know that in John 3:17, it says that God did not send Jesus into the world to sentence us to condemnation, but that Jesus was sent to save us!

I must admit, that it is this expression of salvation history that wakes me up in the morning and gives me the energy I need to be a better person. I pray that all of us, together as the Church can also be encouraged by these words.

Our celebration every Sunday truly is a celebration with a purpose! We will move from this table of the Word and turn our focus and attention to the table of the Eucharist. I pray that all of us will be extra attentive to Dean Candler this morning as he prays the prayers over the unconsecrated elements of bread and wine. A miracle will take place on that table as it is on this table of the Word! We all will encounter Jesus who will make himself totally available to us by being placed in our hands.

Look at the palms of your hands and you will see that you are truly unique! There is no one else on earth with your fingerprints! The way that we are designed by the hand of God is truly an expression of the presence of the divine God within all of us. But, even in our particular uniqueness, we are the same because we all have come short of God’s glory. However, Jesus will make himself present to us and he will say to us “I am the Bread of Life, you come to me shall not hunger! And who believes in me will not thirst!” (Hymn, “I Am the Bread of Life”)

This is my point in this sermon this morning: we all are invited to share in the power of the sacrament of Jesus that calls all

of us as we are, where we are to receive him graciously and humbly. Dear people of God, all of us under this Cathedral roof on this holy hill must know that God is truly in love with all of us!

As the creator and we as the created, must know that we are in an active relationship with God. He has given us everything that we need and this divine supply happens when we receive and trust in his revelation to you and to me, we are changed each and every time that we receive his Jesus through this celebration of Holy Communion.

There is no condemnation here! You and I have been chosen to do great things in his name and he has promised us that we will never be alone! All are welcome in this place and all are welcomed to receive the sacramental fulfillment of Jesus as we are fed with food from heaven! God meets us right here and he invites us to bring him into the world.

Listen to our Eucharistic Prayer for today:

“Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.”

Thank you Jesus for feeding us – not with a refreshing Coca-Cola, but with THE REAL THING: the tangible and spiritual food blessed by God and given to us by the power of the Holy Spirit! My sisters and brothers, please know that you are worthy and you are welcomed to this table! Taste and see the goodness of the Lord!

God has spoken, let the Church say AMEN!