

To know Christ

Philippians 3:4-14

October 2, 2011

We are stewards of God's good gifts.

We are stewards of the mercy of God. As God has shown us mercy, so we too must show mercy to each other. Without the mercy of God, we are nothing. God has made us what we are and we show our gratitude by offering the same kindness, the same forgiveness, the same generosity to all people, to friend and enemy alike.

We are stewards of the community of faith. God has given us to each other, so now we please God by taking good care of each other. This church family, as we are, is God's gift to us, a gift to be valued and protected and enjoyed.

And we are stewards of the Lord's table. It is the Lord's table, the gift of the Lord Jesus to us, a place to come to meet him, to be joined to him, and to be renewed by him.

This table -- where we celebrate the Lord's Supper, holy communion, the eucharist, by whatever name we call it -- this table has been a central element of Christian worship from the very beginning. And it still is. While the form and content of worship differ widely from church to church and from denomination to denomination, communion, and baptism, in some form, are common to all. Communion is an indispensable and vital element of Christian worship wherever and whenever and among whomever it happens.

We are stewards of the Lord's table. All of us who call ourselves Christians are stewards of the Lord's table, charged with making good use and taking good care of this precious gift that has been given us. How? How do we do it? How do we take good care of this gift?

We have tried hard, churches have tried hard, by various means, to be faithful stewards of the Lord's table.

Some choose to protect the integrity of the sacrament by permitting only authorized persons to celebrate communion. In our own denomination, only ordained ministers may serve communion. If a church is being served instead by a trained lay minister, that minister must obtain special authorization from the local association of United Church of Christ churches to be able to celebrate communion in the church.

Some choose to protect the integrity of the sacrament by assuring that only consecrated elements are served. The bread and the wine are blessed, made holy, made something other than, something more than, ordinary bread and wine. And once set aside for this holy purpose, they can be used for nothing else, and nothing else other than consecrated bread and wine may be used to celebrate communion if it is to have any benefit.

Some choose to protect the integrity of the sacrament by restricting access to it. Only those who are baptized, only those who are members of this particular church or this particular denomination, only those who have completed the necessary classes, only those who are of a certain age, only those who have filled out a communion qualification card beforehand, only those who have made themselves worthy through sufficient repentance and penance for their sins, only these people are welcomed at the Lord's table. The rest are not welcome to come, not welcome to receive the bread and the wine. It's by invitation only, the church's invitation.

And some choose to protect the integrity of the sacrament by codifying the liturgy, by prescribing the words that must be said to do it right. I love taking communion at the Episcopal church my mother attends in Maine. We come, all of us, to the front of the sanctuary and kneel and receive the bread and the wine from the celebrants. All is carefully done. All is carefully scripted. The words are the same, exactly the same, every time.

We decide who can serve communion and who can take it. We make sure the right elements are used and the right words are said. We do all we can to keep the Lord's table holy, to set it apart from everything else, to hold it high and keep it safe, untainted and untarnished by anything or anyone who might profane it.

Because what if ...

What if a visitor, a stranger, comes in off the street and takes it, not understanding what it means, maybe even not caring what it means?

What if a little child comes to take it? Surely a little child can't appreciate the meaning and significance of the sacrament.

What if someone comes to serve the meal and uses his own words of invitation? What if she uses her own personal words to speak of its meaning? Might not the original meaning, the true meaning, Jesus' own intentions for this celebration, be confused or obscured?

What if someone who does not believe, who has not repented, who is not a member of any church, comes to take it? Doesn't that lessen the sacred value of this meal for those who share it with him?

But whose table is it?

It is the Lord's table! It is Jesus' table!

And what does Jesus say about it?

It's right there, carved in wood on the front of the table: *Do this in remembrance of me*. When we do this, when we celebrate communion, Jesus wants us to remember him. Jesus wants us to remember him, who he was, what he said, what he did.

What did he say? What did he do? Did he make himself "holy?" Did he set himself above and apart, above the ordinary and apart from the profane and the guilty, the untaught and the unfit?

No! Absolutely not! Jesus made himself ordinary, one of them. He talked to them, touched them, healed them. He ate and drank at their tables and made them welcome at his table. Jesus emptied himself, gave himself, for the sake of those he loved, for the sake of those God loved.

If we want to remember him, if we want to be good stewards of the table he has shared with us, the table to which he has invited us, doesn't it make sense that we would do the same -- empty ourselves, give ourselves, for the sake of those God loves?

Jesus had everything, but he gave up all he had -- titles and entitlements, status and power -- in obedience to God, to do his Father's will. What do we have? What do we have as Christians that gives us our sense of identity and worth? We have our traditions, our heritage, the legacy of those who have gone before, those in whose footsteps we follow.

Roman Catholics have their sense of Church with a capital "C," a Church that firmly delineates the faith, that makes it clear what is right and what is wrong, a Church that draws a direct line of authority from Peter and the apostles.

Pentecostals have ecstasy, overflowing emotion and energy and passion attributed to the presence and power of the Spirit among them.

Orthodox Presbyterians have their theology, systematic and carefully reasoned, clear and consistent and beyond debate.

Methodists have their lifestyle, lives consciously bent toward the will of God, toward letting God's way become integrated into the tasks and choices of each day.

Baptists have their evangelical fervor, their eagerness to proclaim the gospel, wherever and whenever, inside the church and outside the church.

Episcopalians have their sense of dignity and reverence, treating God always with ultimate respect and treating each other with like respect.

And we, Congregationalists, members of the United Church of Christ? We have our tradition of church with a small "c," a church defined and directed locally by those who gather as we seek to follow Jesus together and to pay attention together to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a church eager to let God speak in fresh ways to us and to the world to address the injustices that plague us still.

This is who we are. This is how we see ourselves. This is what we have. But what of this do we bring with us when we come to the Lord's table? Nothing! We come bringing nothing! None of this matters!

Paul, the apostle Paul, the one person who set the future course of the church as much as anyone did, says:

All those things I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ's sake. Not only these things; I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Jesus Christ my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage ...

What would you let go of, what would you throw away, what would you count as garbage, for Jesus' sake?

"All I want," Paul says, "all I want is to know Christ." All I want is to know Christ. All I want is to know Christ. All I want is to know Christ ...

These are his words, but can they become yours?

All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life ...

That's all that matters, and that's all that matters when we come to the communion table. We come to meet Christ here, to know him, to be joined to him, to be united to him in his death, so we may be united with him in his life.

We come to declare ourselves ready and even eager to share in his sufferings, so that by going the way he goes, we may indeed go the way he goes, and experience with him the power and wonder and beauty of his resurrection. We come with nothing, emptying ourselves entirely, in order to receive everything.

So how, then, how will we be good stewards of the Lord's table? Two words ...

Come ...

Come! It is the Lord's table, Jesus' offering of himself to you, for you! It is the place Jesus meets you, the place he offers you grace and mercy and life. So come and eat! Come and drink! Take full advantage of this extraordinary gift! Don't neglect it or ignore the invitation or somehow disqualify yourself. Come! Come often, whenever you can. Come empty and leave full!

Welcome ...

Welcome your brother to the table. Welcome your sister to the table. Welcome me to the table.

Welcome doubters to the table. Welcome sinners to the table. Welcome people you just don't like to the table.

Welcome old people to the table and welcome young people to the table. Welcome long time friends and first-time visitors to the table. Welcome Roman Catholics and Lutherans and Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons and agnostics to the table.

Welcome anybody to the table! Welcome everybody to the table! Welcome any and all who come, because it's not your table! It is the Lord's table!

Or would you want to be the one who turns somebody away, who denies anybody -- any man or any woman or any child -- this opportunity to know Christ?