

Maundy Thursday Service, March 24, 2016

At our last two celebrations of the Lord's Supper I have stressed the truth that more is happening than just a remembering what Jesus did for us, being crucified for our sins and rising from the dead for our justification. In the supper we actually participate in what Jesus did. Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 10:14-21.

"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons."

If we liken remembering to viewing, as when by memory we view something from a distance over time, then viewing is certainly not the same as actually participating. Whether I am in the stands watching a football game, or I am in my armchair remembering last week's game, it is the men on the field who are participating in the game. I'm just an onlooker.

There is, of course, a weak sense of the word "participate" which says those who gather to watch a game are participants. They have spent time and sometimes money and they can at times get emotionally involved. But notice that this sort of participation remains completely separated from what is going on down on the field. Theologians would say it is purely subjective, something just happening inside the heads of people, whereas what is going on down on the field is objective, it is physically real. Just try standing out on the field in the way of the men who are playing!

For full participation, all the players need to be together, as it were, on the same playing field. So the question we have answer is, "Is Jesus present on the playing field?" or more exactly, "Is Jesus present so as to participate with us in the supper?" Obviously He is not here physically in the way that we are here physically. But does that mean He isn't "really" here? One answer to this question is that Jesus, being God, is always everywhere; He is omnipresent. This is true, but it does not address the question of the Supper. If all that participation means here, then we are back to the idea that the Supper is only special or distinct as a participation by the believer in so far as they choose to make it so by way or strength of their remembering. This, in fact, is what the overwhelming majority of people believe. But is it right? Does this understanding help us to realize the full benefit of our participation in the Supper?

Historically the church would emphatically say no. For hundreds of years the Roman Catholic Church operated with the doctrine of transubstantiation in which when the priest blessed the cup and the bread they turned literally into the blood and the body or flesh of the Lord. In this way, Jesus was actually or really present in the Supper. The Protestant Reformers rejected this, but they did not agree amongst themselves as to what the truth was. Luther focused on Jesus' words in the Supper saying "This is my body which is for you." He said this was a literal statement, but having rejected the idea of transubstantiation, for Luther the bread and wine were supernaturally also Jesus' flesh and blood, a teaching called "consubstantiation". Calvin saw it differently than both the Romans Catholics and Luther. He developed the Reformed doctrine which says that while Jesus is really and differently present at the supper than at other times, He is not to be thought of as physically present. The Reformation Study Bible puts it this way: "Calvin taught that though Christ's body and blood remain in heaven, they are spiritually 'made present' to us by Jesus' omnipresent divine nature (*Institutes* 4.217). Wherever the divine nature of Christ is present, He is truly present. This is consistent with Jesus' own teaching that He was 'going away' yet would abide with us. When we meet Him at the Lord's Supper we commune with Him. By meeting us in His divine presence, we are brought into His human presence mystically, because His divine nature is never separated from His human nature. The divine nature leads us to the ascended Christ, and in the Lord's Supper we have a taste of heaven." (RSB, p. 2032) In effect, Calvin moves the issue away from a sole focus on "This is my body which is for you" which was Luther's preoccupation, to the broader teaching of I Corinthians 11. We renew our participation in the covenant by rightly discerning the bread as Jesus' body and the wine as Jesus blood, which is the blood of the new covenant. So Paul says (I Corinthians 11:29), "*For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.*" On this view the bread doesn't really need to be unleavened and the drink doesn't really need to be wine, but the supper does need to be a renewal of the drama of our conversion when we came to understand that Jesus' body was broken and blood was spilt for the forgiveness of our sins and we are gripped again by the sheer wonder of that act of love. We engage with the Lord. We do not merely remember a past event. The event is real again, it is repeated in and for us again, and it is because Jesus is with us at this very moment.

This teaching harmonizes with what we read in Colossians 3:1-4.

"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on the earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you will appear with him in glory."

For the believer reality is less what we see and experience around us on the earthly plain and is more what is true regarding our new spiritual identities which are hidden in Christ in the heavenlies. But there is an essential difference between Colossians 3 and the Reformed teaching on what it means to participate in the Lord's Supper. In Colossians 3 it appears the initiative in all the

action, as it were, hinges on the believer; but in the Supper Jesus actually in His divine Person comes to meet with us. That is a significant difference. We are invited to both expect Him, to anticipate His arrival or presence, and to look for Him. We are to wait for Him. In our worship we are to engage with Him.

Almost the same thing is said regarding the promised presence of Jesus in **Matthew 18:20**, *"For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them."* In its context this assurance regarding prayer ends Jesus teaching on how to pursue reconciliation between estranged believers in a local congregation. The assumption is that all parties in the dispute are Christians who love one another in Christ. The motivation for reconciliation is, therefore, high and that motivation will enflame the desire for Jesus wise and healing presence. I put it this way to distance such prayer from the routine of daily devotions or the potential complacency of ritual, such as can too readily happen in the Lord's Supper.

The conversation Jesus has with each believer will, of course, be a wholly private conversation, for Jesus speaks and listens to our hearts. In one sense this is always true regardless of where we are or what we are doing. In another sense such meeting with Jesus is specific to times of prayer such when we are seeking to bring about reconciliation: we open our hearts and minds to Him. Our hearts can grow cold and our wills resistant to the Lord. One of the most graphic pictures in scripture captures this reality. We find it in **Revelations 3:20**, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me."* In context this statement is directed to lukewarm believers rather than to the lost. Doctrinally the New Testament is pretty clear that unsaved people will simply never open the door to Jesus for they fear Him, despise Him and prefer to resist or run from Him, for they will not abandon their sins. When it comes to the Lord's Supper, however, we have the remarkable assurance from Jesus that he will definitely meet with any who partake, for "This is my body...This cup is the new covenant in my blood." In both of those statements our emphasis tonight is on the personal pronoun: "my". Jesus is literally saying, in the supper the bread and the wine (juice) is me; I am directly and personally involved with and identify with the elements presented here for the meal we are to have together. Together we will participate in the very meal in which I participated with the first disciples the night I was betrayed and arrested, the night before I endured the mock trials, was whipped and mocked and spat upon and, ultimately, crucified and then placed in the tomb.

Having said all this, I don't want any to think remembering is unimportant. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of Me." The remembering is critical. Remembering anchors us in historical reality. What we remember is what has been written down in God's Word. We remember the Jesus who was born of the virgin Mary as was prophesied by Isaiah. We remember the Jesus who was born in

David's city of Bethlehem and of David's blood line. We remember the Jesus who grew up in Nazareth, who performed miracles and preached in Galilee and Judea, who walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee, who healed blind people, paralytics and lepers and restored sight to the blind, who selected 12 men to train as His disciples to carry the good news of His death for our sins and His resurrection as the affirmation that in him our sins are paid for and we are freed from guilt, reconciled to our heavenly Father and given hope for eternity.