



**ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN**

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Remember

Deuteronomy 11.18–20

1 Corinthians 11.23–26

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This was quite a week. I almost feel like a radiant Moses coming down off Mount Sinai. I attended the Festival of Homiletics—aka—a preaching conference, in Washington DC. In addition to a variety of workshops, each day there were worship services plus lectures by renown theologians and scholars, many of them seminary professors and authors. It was thrilling! Over the course of the week, we packed out the Washington National Cathedral, the Metropolitan AME Church and the National City Church, as preachers from around the world gathered to learn, and to be inspired and to delight in being in the presence of not only outstanding presenters, but 1,700 attendees who share a passion for homiletics!

The theme this year was Preaching and Politics. We heard a lot about what it means to be a follower of Jesus in this day and age and culture. It was clear that our traditions and theologies and styles differed—we aren't all of one mind. But in this delightfully diverse gathering, where all were embraced and valued, we drank deeply from other's wells and learned new appreciations.

To be sure it was an intense week. At times there was lament, at times there was passion, at times there was holy anger. And throughout, good humor and even fun infused the intensity, to keep us from taking ourselves too seriously. One evening the speaker was talking about care for creation and "pasture-fed beef." Only he unwittingly had said "pastor-fed beef," and the crowd erupted in laughter, while he continued talking, puzzled by the hearty response.

I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to attend this conference. There's something that happens when we are immersed in another setting with new people and ideas and experiences.

2 The conference kicked-off Monday evening with a “high church” service in The National Cathedral—every bit as awe-inspiring as the greatest cathedrals of Europe. The service concluded with the Eucharist, or communion, offered to all. We heard again these very familiar words of the Apostle Paul:

I CORINTHIANS 11.23B–25

...the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

We made our way to the nearest station in the sanctuary. One by one, we were handed a paper-thin wafer. We then were invited to dip it into wine or juice, or to drink straight from the chalice, as a common cup. All in all, it was a moving experience to witness 1,700 pastors coming forward to partake and remember.

And this experience served as a lens for me for the week, as I looked forward to this morning, as we celebrate the Eucharist, or Communion, or what we often call the bread and cup.

Many Christian traditions celebrate communion weekly—Catholics, some Lutherans, Episcopalians, Anglicans. In fact, for some, communion is the highlight of every worship service. The rest of the service is built around partaking of the bread and wine and it wouldn’t feel like a worship service without it.

In those traditions, communion is considered one of the sacraments of the church—including other rituals, like anointing and baptism. These sacraments are believed to

be a means by which God enacts God's grace upon someone. In other words, a sacrament does something to a person. Upon offering the sacrament of bread and cup, it is believed that they truly become the body and blood of Christ, without changing appearance.

In our tradition, we understand these rituals differently. In an effort to peel away the layers of tradition of the state churches, the early Brethren returned to the scriptures and the practices of the early church. We call our traditions "ordinances," because we are doing what we believe the Bible ordains. These include not only communion and love feast, but anointing, the holy kiss, child/parent dedication, and baptism. None of these ordinances do something to a person. They are simply an outward sign of an inward commitment or openness. They don't change in form...they are merely symbols. So for us, the bread stays bread, and the wine...becomes grape juice!

This is reflected, too, in what we call the worship center, or the communion table. In other traditions, this might be called an altar, which would indicate a special holy place where the Eucharist is consecrated, as it becomes the body and blood of Christ.

I love how the Brethren Encyclopedia defines the Communion Table. It says it is a "piece of churchly furniture." In 1958, Annual Conference opened the way for congregations to practice the bread and cup communion apart from the full Love Feast. For our first 250 years, the bread and cup had been celebrated only within the context of Love Feast, a re-enactment of the Jesus' last supper with his disciples. But an interest in the 1950's to resemble other Protestant practices introduced bread and cup communion to a Sunday morning worship service (often celebrated as we do—twice a year in addition to Love Feast). The communion table, then, appeared in chancels to accommodate

4 serving communion and also to provide a visually pleasing focus for the worship space.

A friend of mine was new to the ministry and was serving his first congregation. Wanting to be neighborly and community-minded, he participated in the local ministerium. It was decided that a community Thanksgiving service would be held in one of the neighborhood churches. As the service began, the ministers and priests of the town entered the sanctuary. One-by-one, they processed across the chancel area to seats on the opposite side. Each one would pause in front of the “altar” and genuflect, offer the sign of the cross, or bow in reverence to the altar. My friend was the last minister to cross the chancel. Fresh out of seminary, he knew that genuflecting before the altar was not congruent with our beliefs. So as he crossed the area, headed to his seat, he paused in the middle, and instead of bowing to the altar, he did a 180 and turned...and waved to...what we believe is the body of Christ—the gathered community. He was theologically congruent as he acknowledged the body with a wave and a smile!

We are the body of Christ, the gathered community, and this morning we celebrate. We recognize rituals not because we want to hang on to the past, but because they offer us a rootedness and a connection with our heritage that serve as a foundation as we move into the future. They help us to remember what matters.

The ancient Hebrews were good at rituals, at remembering who they were and whose they were. They were intentional.

DEUTERONOMY 11.18–20

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when

you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

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We don't bind our beliefs to our foreheads, literally. But rituals do help us to remember. So, given our understanding of the key tenets of our faith, the core values that we share as followers of Jesus' way, what is it that the Bread and Cup communion helps us to remember? For many, this theology of the eating bread and drinking wine as the body and blood isn't congruent with our experience and understanding of Jesus. According to scholar Vernard Eller, in biblical times, it was thought that blood is the symbol of life; blood is liquid life. And bread likewise represents life. This life, shared and given, is an act of love and grace in devotion to God and neighbor.

In the scripture—Jesus gave thanks...translated from the Greek *he eucharistia* meaning the “thanksgiving.” The Eucharist then is one great Thanksgiving feast!

I think that there are two profound things that Jesus would have imparted at that feast that are important for us to remember. The first is the power of love that people encountered and continue to encounter in the person of Jesus. And the other is that Jesus practiced Open Table Fellowship—no one was turned away from the table...all were welcome.

Without a doubt, the most meaningful experience for me this week was a prayer service and candlelight vigil Thursday evening, led by elders of the church. Walking with candles in silence, from the National Church to the White House, 2,500 people of faith took their faith to the streets in a new movement called Reclaiming Jesus. One of the speakers at the service was none other than the new rock star Episcopalian Bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry, who blew the world away with his sermon last Saturday at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. More than

6 any other impression of the pomp and circumstance of the wedding, the sermon delivered by Bishop Curry is what people are still talking about. In it, he proclaimed the **power of love** and challenged its hearers to “think and imagine a world where love is the way.” He said that the “good news of Jesus Christ is not only that we are loved, but that this love isn’t simply a sentimental thing, it’s a way of life, and it’s a way of life that actually makes a difference in people’s lives and in the life of the world.” That’s what people encountered in Jesus and that’s what we remember, and help to remind one another. The power of love.

And we remember that all are welcome to encounter that love. Jesus invited all to the table...women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized. It was scandalous. The inclusiveness of Jesus’ movement embodied a radically alternative social vision. These were real meals with real outcasts. And they were welcome at the table. And we can do no less.

Sometimes we forget, we get busy. We get distracted. Other things occupy our minds and our hearts. And that why together we eat and drink and remember. We remember the power of love. And the radical hospitality of the Gospel, that all, all, all, are welcome at the table.

