

Do this in remembrance of me

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Gary Harder

Text: 1 Corinthians 11::23-26

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 5:1-16

Today is world communion Sunday. Christians of all stripes around the world will be hearing the words, “do this in remembrance of me”.

Do this in remembrance of me. Words of Jesus. Paul quotes these words in his communion instruction in 1 Cor. 11. What is it that we are to remember?

I have experienced some very memorable communion services in my life.

I think of the one our small tour group held on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We had heard many stories from Palestinians harassed by Israeli settlers. We had engaged with some of these settlers, and with some Rabbis. In that place where Jesus walked and taught and healed, and in that political context, our remembering was very poignant – and very powerful.

I think of a small, intimate offering of communion bread and wine as we gathered around a death bed here in Toronto. A follower of Jesus wanted to enter eternity with this remembering. There was a sacred peace surrounding her dying.

I think of a Holy Eucharist service we attended in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo. 12 loaves of bread. The priest chooses the most perfect one to bless for the communion. Then he blesses the other 11 loaves to be distributed to the hungry after the service.

Most communion services are more ordinary – done in ordinary time. But to me they never become routine. Each time we take the bread and drink the wine we sense again that the ordinary is tinged with sacredness, with a presence that is extra-ordinary.

Do this in remembrance of me. What are we to remember?

Today I don't want to give a treatise on communion. I don't want to try to explain it. I want rather to reflect on what we are invited to remember about Jesus as we celebrate communion. This sermon is much more in the nature of a personal testimony. I have led many communion services over my more than 50 years of ministry. Today I want to share with you why I still find this Jesus so compelling, so winsome, so intriguing, so counter-cultural, so worthy of my allegiance.

I am fully aware that a large part of the Christian world does not see Jesus the way I do; the way we Anabaptists mostly do. Already in the fourth century emperor Constantine, who made the Roman Empire Supposedly Christian, named as his rallying cry for world conquest, "in the name of Christ conquer". For his military campaigns Constantine took along his priests and the cross. "In the cross of Christ, conquer". And when the conquering army led the captive soldiers back to Rome, and they crossed a river, he would sometimes have his priests baptize the heathen, whether they wanted to be baptized or not. Now they too were Christians. And so it was that the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, the Jesus of Philippians 2, somehow got turned into the Jesus of the crusades, the Jesus of the inquisitions, the Jesus blessing the plane and crew carrying the atomic bombs to Japan, the Jesus at the head of the residential school system in Canada trying to "take the Indian out of the Indian".

Notice again how our text from Philippians describes Jesus. "let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore, he is exalted, and every knee should bend...and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord...". Our knees will bend and our tongues confess this Jesus, not because he has conquered and subdued us, but because he has loved us into his embrace.

My conviction is that we need to remember the life and death of Jesus, and the words of Jesus, as the most-clear alternative to a culture of violence, and greed, a culture promoted by many Christians ever since the fourth century. It is a culture seemingly ingrained in so many followers of Jesus even today.

Why do I still even name myself a Christian – a Jesus follower? Why do I still find the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, and the Jesus described in Philippians 2, so compelling, so winsome?

Personal context

The answer to the question of why I am still a Christian isn't all that self-evident. There have been many times in my life as a Christian and as a pastor, when I have failed miserably in being a Jesus follower. And there have been a few times in my life when I have really questioned my earlier commitment, and wondered whether I even wanted to be called a Christian. It was hard sometimes to read or hear about what some Christians have done, and continue to do, supposedly in the name of Christ – some of the most brutal wars in history, supporting slavery, destroying aboriginal identity, acting in very unloving ways.

And within the church itself, including the Mennonite Church, we have done many unloving things to each other. There has been so much oppression, and judgementalism, and excommunications, and exclusions, all in the name of Jesus who lived and taught none of these things. It was hard, sometimes, to want to continue to be known as a Christian - until I would read Jesus again in the Gospels and fall in love with him all over again.

On World Wide Communion Sunday, we place ourselves in solidarity with Christians of all stripes and all denominations. We all get it wrong much of the time. And we disagree with each other on many things. None of us know the full truth. What we all have in common though is Jesus, however we understand him. And that is enough. On this World Wide Communion Sunday, we are all “doing this in remembrance of Jesus,” And we all are still learning who Jesus really is.

Personal confession and testimony

Why am I still a Christian today in this post-modern, secular, post-Christian world? I am still a Christian because the Jesus of the Gospels is so appealing to me, and so compelling. No, I don't find the Jesus of the various crusades, or the Jesus of the tele-evangelists, or the Jesus of right wing politics, or the Jesus of the many different atonement theories compelling at all. But the

Jesus of the Gospels is. I am still a Christian because I continue to experience this Jesus, this Christ, as a saving power in my life. I am still a Christian today because I find this Jesus so winsome – and so startling – and so counter-cultural – and so compelling. In the Gospels I discover a Jesus who shows me who God is and what God is like – a God I can love with all my being.

A) In the first place I am persuaded by the teaching of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount, in both Matthew's version and Luke's version, is the most comprehensive statement of the teachings of Jesus. It is probably a summary rather than one long sermon preached in one setting. Mennonites have seen the Sermon on the Mount as the key to understanding what Jesus expects of his followers. Hard words they are, in some places, and in some respects almost impossible to fully live out. Many Christians in fact have abandoned them because they say these teachings are impossible to live out in our complicated world. And many Biblical scholars of all stripes have found ingenious ways to explain how these teachings were surely not applicable to today, an impossible ideal meant for another time, or an ideal meant to be followed by only a very few special saints. How, they say, can we really be expected to love our enemies in times like these?

But listen again to some of Jesus' words. "How blessed are you who are poor in spirit (or as Luke puts it, how blessed are the poor), for yours is – present tense – the Kingdom of God. How blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God". Everything is turned on its ear. Everything seems turned upside down. It goes against the grain of common sense. And yet it rings true to me.

And then Jesus gets very, very practical. He talks about things like anger, adultery, divorce, legal oaths, false and pretend piety, judging others. So very practical. This is about daily, ordinary life. Some of it sounds very difficult to live out, but we know deep inside that it touches the core truths of our lives.

"You have heard it said", Jesus goes on to say, "you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your

Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love only those who love you, what reward do you have. Do not even tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Be fully compassionate, therefore, as your Father is compassionate.” (Many translations say “be perfect” which I think is rather unfortunate. Be fully compassionate is the more helpful interpretation).

Other teachings too appeal to me in powerful ways, especially the many parables. They are so explosive, so disarming, so charming, so challenging. They slip right through my defenses. Like the parable of the prodigal son which shows me again what God the Father is like, always waiting with open arms for my return from wandering off the path.

So, in the first place, I am persuaded by the teachings of Jesus.

B) In the second place, I am also persuaded by the life of Jesus, by how he lived, by what he did, by how he gave evidence that he was the Son of God in a way that you and I aren't.

Mostly I am persuaded by his loving, compassionate way of life. Most of his public ministry was not preaching sermons, but was going about healing people of their physical and emotional and spiritual and relational illnesses. He showed an immense compassion and demonstrated an immense power to heal. He could look into the core of someone's soul and know exactly what that person needed in order to be healed, to become free again, to be a full member of the community again.

Along the way he challenged and confronted the religious and political leaders who were holding onto their power and their privilege and their wealth. There was nothing meek and mild about him, even if our Christmas carols claim otherwise. He became angry. He called people on their hypocrisy. But, it was mostly the religious and political leaders who felt his wrath, not the so called sinners and the poor and the outsiders against whom the religious leaders directed their wrath. To all who were

hurting he showed an amazing compassion, an amazing love. He related to women in a caring, mutual, non-exploitive way almost impossible to imagine in that society – or in ours.

I am persuaded by the life of Jesus; by the way he showed us the very face of God.

C) In the third place, I am persuaded by the death and resurrection of Jesus – by the story we enter when we observe communion. I know that over the centuries many Christians have moved from story to doctrine, and have developed many persuasive theories and doctrines about why Jesus had to die and about how, if we just accept their doctrine we too can be “saved”.

Far more compelling to me than any of these atonement theories is that Jesus was so convinced that love was more powerful than was violence, that he chose to die rather than kill, chose to love his enemies to the end rather than to bring down his troupe of angels to rescue him and destroy his enemies. In choosing to die rather than to kill, he demonstrated the ultimate kind of loving – God’s way of loving. That is incredibly winsome and persuasive to me.

And then God gave God’s stamp of approval to that way. Then God said, “Yes, that is my kind of love”, and raised Jesus from the grave, an ultimate sign of the ultimate power of that love. I do believe in a literal resurrection. And I believe that this kind of love and power – this kind of resurrection love and power – is loosed on the world as God’s great saving power. And I believe that we Christians, and we as Churches, are called to live out this kind of resurrection love.

Conclusion

The Hebrew root word for the name Jesus is “Yashah”. This word, this name, has two meanings that are closely related. 1) It means to become broad again when life has closed in around you. 2) It means to be set free when you feel bound and un-free. When life becomes enclosed,

constricted, claustrophobic, bound, un-free, un-loved, un-loving, Jesus invites us into healing, invites us into his salvation. We can be set free from those things that still bind us, still hold us back, still empties life of meaning and joy. We can be set free to work compassionately for a better world, set free to live counter-culturally, set free to live in God's way in God's world.

As Jesus himself said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Abundant life, full life, purposeful life, love-filled life. What more could anyone want or need.

It is this kind of life that we celebrate when we observe communion. "Do this in remembrance of me".