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This Holy Mystery: Thanksgiving and Joy

There is a story told of a little church that had an unusual ritual every Sunday morning. When they sang the Gloria Patri they stood, turned to the right facing a blank white wall and sang. Every Sunday without fail they did this. A newcomer to the church was puzzled by this and asked, "Why do you do this?" No one knew. The only answer they could come up with was, "we've always done it this way." That answer did not satisfy the newcomer. Other people were asked the same question. Finally, an elderly man who had gone to church longer than anyone else remembered the reason. It seems that at one time they didn't have hymnals and the words to this song were painted on the large white wall. Everyone stood, turned to the right facing the wall and sang.

Over the years, the words faded, and the wall was repainted, and no one remembered the significance for standing and turning toward the wall.

Often, we lose the real significance of why we do certain things within our worship service, such as partaking in the Lord's Supper. We just go through the motions and go on to something else. Rarely do we stop to think about just what is the significance of communion for us in the 21st century? We live in a fast-paced technological society where we rush through our days failing to reflect on the whys of what we do. But this Lent, we are going to slow down long enough to focus in on this sacramental meal, this bread and cup, and what it means to us as individuals, and corporately, as a community of faith. As we journey through the 40 days leading up to Holy Week and Easter, we will be partaking of this holy meal every Sunday – and each week we'll do so in a slightly different way. Some days we'll walk forward to receive the elements by intinction, other days we'll kneel, and we'll even break out the racks with the individual cups for juice, so we can receive the elements right where we are in our pews. While the modes of receiving will change week to week, we'll also focus in of a different dimension of what this meal really means to us... delving into the richness of our Wesleyan sacramental theology of this Holy Mystery.

As our Lenten season begins on Ash Wednesday, our series actually began a few days ago as we received an ash cross on our foreheads, followed by the gift of communion. As we received the bread and cup, we were asked to reflect on the love and forgiveness that is offered to us through God's love in Christ. As we recalled our mortality, that from ashes we

have come, and to ashes we will return, we heard the call to make the most of our days as a gift from God – seeking forgiveness and grace and offering it to others as well. Life is too short to NOT believe in second chances, and to live into our call to give and receive forgiveness.

This week, we turn to one aspect of our sacred ritual that is most often forgotten – the inherent joy and call to give thanks that is a part of this communion meal. If you were to look around at the faces in the congregation when we transition into communion, you would see a shift to a serious somber tone... it's like everyone thinks we're required to take this meal with a straight face... that there is no joy allowed at Christ's table... and that's anything but the truth! I agree that the table should be approached with reverence, but reverence and solemnity are not the same thing at all. There is such a thing as joyful reverence, and somehow, children understand this intuitively. When given permission to share in communion, most kids come with a sense of awe – a recognition that they are taking part in something that matters, even if they don't fully understand it (and really, who does fully understand that which even scholars and theologians call "This Holy Mystery"). Children, if given the opportunity, don't grab a tiny square of bread, they tear off a large chunk, and dip it unreservedly into the cup of juice. In fact, if given the chance, they'll take the cup and drink it joyfully! If my girls see that we've celebrated communion during worship, but they were in Sunday school or the nursery, they'll run up to me asking to receive... not wanting to be excluded from sharing in the "Jesus bread" that reminds them that they are loved.

Another word for Communion is Eucharist. It is a Greek word which means thanksgiving. One of the first lines that is a part of the standard communion liturgy is "It is a right and good and joyful thing, always and everywhere, to give thanks to you, God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." The very opening lines are all about joyfully giving thanks for all God has done and is doing in our lives. By offering bread and grape juice to God, we thank our Creator for this world, the people in it, and all the other signs of God's love that surround us. We also especially thank God for Jesus, for his life, his teachings, and the new life Jesus has brought us. Thanksgiving is not only reserved for the third Thursday in November, but should be celebrated regularly, reminding us of all the blessings in our lives.

I wonder if here is the rub for some adults... we get so weighed down by the tragedies and struggles that surround us on a daily basis that we forget to be joyful... we forget to say thank you for God's gifts. When we turn on the TV, look online, or open the paper and are inundated by BAD news... political chaos, discrimination and abuse, degradation of the earth, and mass destruction caused by nature or human-made catastrophes. In a world with so many heartbreaking headlines, it's hard to lift up prayers for thanks and joy... It makes you wonder if the Apostle Paul's insistence that we "Rejoice in the Lord always... again I will say, rejoice" is an empty and impossible suggestion given by someone who knows nothing of the contemporary world.

While Paul didn't know of our daily struggles, he had plenty of his own... in fact he wrote this line during his imprisonment in Philippi... the second time he was thrown in prison for preaching the good news of Jesus. Paul writes of the discipline of rejoicing as if it was an act of resistance when injustices and struggles pile up. In fact, Paul uses the words "joy" and "rejoice" 15 times in this letter to the Philippians, even while he's sitting in prison. He said if he should be sentenced to death, he would still rejoice. I'm reminded of young people singing

joyfully in jail during the civil rights movement, and of a friend who battled cancer with laughter and levity until it took his life. This sort of rejoicing isn't a form of denial. Neither is it an exercise in the power of positive thinking. It is an expression of holy resistance, refusing to let hardships rob us of our joy in the Lord.

As we approach the communion table today, I invite us to really reflect on the blessings in our lives... even those that come with their own struggles and challenges. I invite us to approach with a joyful spirit... with thanksgivings pouring from our heart... Don't be afraid to smile, to feel the joy of the lord well up from within as we join together in this sacred meal. May the joy you experience here at the table spur you on and give you strength for the resistance – for the continued walk of faithful discipleship and service. So let us come...

Come in faith – find the joy of believing that we are God's beloved.

Come in hope – feel the joy of receiving, trusting that God's story is not over yet.

Come in love – see how God is calling you to share your love with others.

Come in peace – know that Christ lives in and through you.

Here we come to the table of grace to be fed, full of joy and thanksgivings overflowing. Thanks be to God. Amen!