

Stanford Memorial Church  
August 27, 2006

**EUCCHARISTIC TRIPTYCH**  
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Psalm 84

Gospel: John 6.56-69

There is something strange and unsettling about this gospel passage. It sounds familiar . . . yet somehow not quite right. The references obviously call to mind the well-known words of the Lord's Supper, Communion, or Eucharist—three usages, generally used interchangeably for the sacrament observed by the church since the death of Jesus. It, along with baptism, appears to have been adopted almost immediately after the resurrection.

But this account from the Gospel of John bristles with an in-your-face quality we do not find in the related accounts from the other three gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Lay them side by side and the Johannine version sounds unique and distinct. It does not call to mind the portrait immortalized by Di Vinci's painting of Jesus and the disciples--gathered around a table in a secret upper room, an intimate affair, a frightening moment filled with uncertainty and fear, and a sense that they were standing on the threshold of the betrayal and death of Jesus.

John's version could not be more distinct and contrary. Rather than huddling in a darkened upper room in the heart of Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples are in the fresh open air along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Rather than fear and apprehension, the disciples share feelings of elation and pride. The throngs of people drawn to Jesus—his healing and teachings—increases daily. He seems to be at the apex of his ministry . . . not at the conclusion of it. Sensing the exhaustion and neediness of those gathered on the mountainside, Jesus asks his disciples to find food. After an extensive search, however, they were only able to muster five barley loaves and two fish from a small boy who happened to be there. Yet somehow it proves ample, so much so that they proceed to gather twelve basketfuls of leftovers—after everyone had been fully fed. Jesus, sensing that the people in their enthusiasm are about to take him and declare him their king, seeks refuge in the mountains. The disciples decide to escape by taking a boat to Capernaum on the other side of the lake. In the middle of the night the disciples perceive Jesus walking on the storm tossed lake, and they soon land on the shore at Capernaum.

In the morning the restless crowd, unable to locate Jesus, discovers that he has somehow managed to cross the lake. After running to the other side, their frenzy borders on a riot as they discover Jesus miraculously joined with his disciples. How did he do that? How did he manage to feed so many with so little? How did he cross the lake? Their adulation strained the bounds of credulity. It is precisely at this moment of overflowing emotion and enthusiasm in Capernaum that Jesus—almost defiantly--declares, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6.56)—not a way to win friends and influence people!

This more strident version of the Lord's Supper stands in sharp contrast to the more familiar one given to us by the apostle Paul in the eleventh chapter of First

Corinthians, which most consider the earliest version we have. As he informs us, “Jesus, the same night in which he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take, eat, this is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” The words have an invitational quality, rather than the confrontational tone we find in John. The difference may well be a reflection of how the times had changed. Paul’s earlier version was written around 57 A.D. In this era the early Christian movement was generally viewed as a kind of radical Jewish splinter group. By the time John’s version appeared, at least a quarter of a century had passed, and persecution—by the Romans conquerors as well as the Jewish neighbors—had become more intense. Thus the words of Jesus, in John’s later version, have more of a life and death urgency to them. Becoming a Christian or a follower of the Way, began to include the distinct possibility of persecution and suffering. The words of Jesus, “eat my body and drink my blood,” convey more of a life and death urgency.

In essence, both Paul and John were writing their own inspired version of the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist, in a way that spoke to the times and conditions in which they were living. So we might well ask, “What would be the version for our time?” How might we create something for our time, on this last Sunday of August—about to close out another summer. Well, if you were unable to attend the traditional Summer Bible or Church School, or did not get away to a church camp this summer, I would like to propose making your own Eucharistic Triptych.

My little Webster’s *Collegiate Dictionary* gives two definitions for a triptych. First is “an ancient Roman writing tablet with three waxed leaves hinged together.” Second, a triptych is “a picture or carving in three panels side by side: especially, an altarpiece with a central panel and two flanking panels.” What we are talking about today, of course, is the second definition. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance they were produced from the Byzantine to the English Celtic branches of the Church. Examples abound in museums with artifacts from this era, Produced by such classical artists as Hieronymus Bosch and Peter Paul Rubins. Here is the apse of our Memorial Church we have something of a triptych. In the center panel we view the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross. In the panel to the left we see a representation of his birth. And then on the right his ascension into heaven, following his death and resurrection, is portrayed. In this instance the three panels proceed in a chronological order, which is a common pattern. If were to apply this same format to our gospel lesson from John, we might have Jesus featured prominently in the central panel declaring that those who abide in him are those who “eat my flesh and drink my blood.” The gospel writer informs us that several of the disciples said, “this teaching is difficult; who can accept it”(6.60)? . . . “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no loner went about with him”(6.66). These listeners, many of whom had been considered as disciples, decided this was too much and they left. We could depict this group—the ones who felt the saying was too touch, the cost too high—in the left panel of our triptych from John. Then, on the right side, would be the disciples who understood, as Jesus himself explained, that he was not speaking in a literal sense, but in a more figurative sense of “spirit and life,” for “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless”(6.63).

So what about our own little triptych, our summer project for today? For each panel I would like to suggest a fundamental religious category. Lets begin with the left panel and call it the panel of Faith. Faith is that conviction that thee is much more to life

than what we can see and touch. It is the audacious conviction that the creator of the seemingly infinite universes in which we find ourselves somehow reaches out to us, in concern and care, and we respond. In Jesus Christ we are given a model of love that reaches us, especially in the midst of suffering, knowing us better than we know ourselves, caring for us in a way too deep for words.

Each of us has been introduced to this faith in a unique and personal way. Perhaps it was a matter of being raised in the religious family, going to church every Sunday, and often during the week, was a given. Or maybe it is just the opposite, your family saw no need for faith or religion; perhaps it was considered irrelevant or a weakness. But something still made a difference for you. In all likelihood it was another person. Possibly a friend or a minister or priest. When I think of my first conscious encounter with faith, an older neighborhood lady comes to mind whose name I have long forgotten. But I have a vivid image in my mind, at the age of 7 or 8, of going to her little apartment every Thursday afternoon after school. There would be five or six of us and she would have little chairs set up in a row, a few treats, and she would generally proceed to use a pictureboard to illustrate stories from the Bible. Each of us has his or her own version of how our life was intersected by faith. How we somehow felt connected to a fundamental reality beyond ourselves. How felt called to do something with our life beyond the immediate here and now. How we felt sustained by this ultimate reality or ground of being—or God. Ultimately, we define faith by identifying with the disciples who—when Jesus asked if they too would desert him?—responded, in the words of Peter, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (6.68). I invite you to fill in the left panel of your Eucharistic triptych with your unique experience of faith.

Next we turn to the right panel, which will be identified by the word Hope. This concept tends to be a bit more elusive to get a hold of, because it can so easily be misunderstood and perverted. A hoping outlook can be so easily confused with a “hoping that” approach to life. For example, I hope that I win the game. I hope that I find the perfect mate. I hope that I am cured of this disease. This, in effect, puts hope in a straight jacket. It is a way of saying, “unless it happens in this way, then it does not count or matter.” Hoping that, in this limited sense, is more akin to superstition. Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist, and active Christian, defined hope as “the positive expectations in a studied situation which go beyond the visible facts” (*The Vital Balance*, p. 386). Hoping is having a sense of openness, of having an outlook that affirms there is always something more involved than what seems to immediately evident. “I may not be cured of my disease, but I may experience a healing which enriches me with a deeper understanding of life and reconciliation with others. Menninger goes on to say, “hope reflects the working of the life instinct in its constant battle against the various forces that add up to self-destruction” (p. 394). Hope not only says we are here to make a difference, but believes that we can make a difference. So our Eucharistic Triptych now has Faith on the left panel and Hope on the right.

This leaves the central panel which, as you might well guess, is characterized by Love. There could hardly be a better representation of it than the Lord’s Supper, so often depicted, as in the apse here at Memorial Church. It is the symbol of a caring and sustaining community. It is Love which brings a deeper affirmation to our Faith while also infusing our Hope in a way enables us to move beyond seemingly insurmountable obstacles. And this Love is very practical. Study after study have shown that people who

have a sustaining community, a network of support, generally live longer and enjoy better psychological and mental health. Living in isolation is perilous to your health and spirit.

Sometimes we are reminded of this pervasive power of love in community in unexpected ways. Dr. Robert H. Smith, a New Testament professor for Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, who died from cancer earlier this year, About a year before his death he wrote,

Everyone complains about hospital food. And I include myself. In fact I feel like a hypocrite when I sit before a tray of hospital vittles and solemnly intone, "We thank you, Lord, for these gifts of food and drink" But on December 30 as I was spooning up wild rice soup at UCSF Medical Center, I found myself saying, "Hey, this isn't so bad. It's hot, nutritious, and fairly tasty. What more do you want?"

What's so wrong with this food.

Then he reflects on having read earlier that "In Luke's Gospel, Jesus saves people by fellowshiping with them."

This leads Professor Smith to reflect, Surely one of the things wrong about hospital food is that a solitary patient sits before a single tray, in silent isolation and eats a lonely meal. Eating has been downgraded from a saving social event to a mere act of nutrition.

Maybe my attitude toward hospital food will improve if instead of "giving thanks" I would pray "Come, Lord Jesus." That would put two of us at the table, and that might just save the day!

So too may we come, in just a few minutes, to the Lord's table, each with our unique Eucharistic Triptych of Faith, Hope and Love, renewed by our community together . . . recalling the words of the apostle Paul that "Faith, Hope and Love abide, and the greatest of these is Love . . . and praying "Come, Lord Jesus." Amen