

Holy Week Message

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Sitting among the memorabilia on my bedroom dresser is a glass communion cup, the cup I used on Maundy Thursday about forty-five years ago on the night I was confirmed and received the sacrament for the first time. Through many moves and transitions I have managed to keep it intact; it still evokes memories of a darkened sanctuary, rich with the aroma of grape juice, the familiar faces of cherished family, pastors, and friends shadowed by the growing darkness of Tenebrae and the annual recital of the betrayals and desertions that followed the meal in the Upper Room. I “owned the covenant” that evening, as was the custom in my New England Congregational church, promising to join the walk with God and my fellow church members that God would reveal to us in the “blessed Word of truth.”

This year politics and controversy have forced their way into Holy Week. For many members of the United Church of Christ these have been unwelcome guests, disturbing and alienating. My own Palm Sunday celebration in a wonderful renewing congregation in West Virginia felt wedged into a media storm that was relentlessly portraying our church in distorted and damaging ways. Response to my own reflections on these events ranged from deep gratitude to bitter calls for resignation. Interviews have disrupted schedules, and countless UCC folk have kept the phone ringing to offer help and to urge their own recipe for responding to all of this. The IRS inquiry lurks in the back corners of my mind and, like most of our pastors, various administrative challenges that can't be deferred demand attention, crowding out time set aside to ponder the mysteries of the Cross and the Empty Tomb.

Then, amidst it all, we pause this week to remember the war and all that has been lost in these five years. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!”

Along with these public concerns, I find myself sitting in the pew this Holy Week carrying my own more private worries and thoughts, not unlike so many other members of our churches who will look to their pastors for a word of grace framed by Thursday's shadows and Easter's promise. My twenty-five year old son, recently deployed with his National Guard unit to Afghanistan, is never very far from my thoughts. And I will squeeze in a hurried trip tomorrow to Baltimore to visit my 93 year old mother, recently moved to the health center in her retirement community with severe back pain. Concern for her and guilt that distance and professional preoccupations have left it to my sister to carry the difficult load of consultations with physical therapists and doctors, arranging aides in the hope that she might be able to return to her apartment, etc. – these thoughts, too, linger.

So this Holy Week in particular I cherish my little glass communion cup and the rich meaning associated with it. It points to the centered spirit found in Christ's presence and shared in Christ's community, the centered spirit that we all need in these demanding and disturbing times. The renewal of my baptism that Maundy Thursday long ago seems very distant at times. But one of the church fathers, writing of the baptism of Jesus and of our own baptism, reminds us that

although that day belongs to the past, the power of the mystery which was then revealed has not passed away; we are not left with a news report of bygone events, to be received in faith and remembered with veneration. God's bounty toward us has been multiplied, so that even in our own times we daily experience the grace which belonged to those first beginnings. (St. Leo the Great)

May the mysteries into which we are now entering remain powerful for each of us this year, offering healing and hope. May the grace of those first beginnings, whenever and wherever they took place for each of us, endure and grow. And, as we pray for our wounded and weary world this Holy Week, so often dividing and disrupting, may we also remember to pray for one another that we may each encounter the Risen Christ on our walk from the Upper Room toward Emmaus.