

One Body; Not Like One Body

I Corinthians 10:16-17, 12:12-27

A sermon on the Lord's Supper for the Season of Epiphany

In this season of Epiphany we've been looking at how God works practically, how he works through his Word. Last week it was Baptism and today it's the Lord's Supper. In order to deal properly with the Lord's Supper, communion, Eucharist, it is important to go to the baseline: God became a human being and died and rose again for you and me.

When we look at the New Testament, we find this is a complicated business because only God can do what Jesus does, and yet he is human, too. Consider the following:

The fourth chapter of the Gospel of Mark ends with the account of the storm at sea. The disciples wake Jesus up and he says to the wind: "Peace, be still." And the storm stops. The disciples say: "Who is this that the wind and the waves obey him?" Only God.

In the eleventh chapter of John there is the man called Lazarus who died and had been dead four days. He didn't just appear to be dead. The people then knew all about catatonia, that is, where people seem to die. They knew all about ghosts and spirits and tricks. But Jesus came to his tomb and spoke: "Lazarus, come out" (John 11:43). And Lazarus was alive again. Who can do that except God?

In Luke 8:45 it says Jesus was walking along and a woman who was ill touched the hem of his garment. Then he said: "Who touched me?" You'd think he would know who touched him if he was God. He wasn't just playing a game.

Or on the cross Jesus cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). And then he died.

How do you put this together? It was not a charade or a game; he truly died. He was both God and man.

Christians have scrambled to explain all this. Some say: "When he became truly one of us, he was no longer God." But others say: "He was God, but he was pretending not to be."

The church looked at this for four hundred years. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. they decreed: "Don't go there. We hold both. He is truly God, truly human and don't try to think beyond that."

C.S. Lewis said either that Jesus is truly God and died and rose again, or it's all nonsense. To be sure, we can honor him as an important leader, but finally it's foolish, even idolatry. It's either foolish, or it's the big one.

When I say: "Once upon a time," you know that I'm going to tell you a well-known fairy tale, or I'm going to talk about something in the past and perhaps it was a little different than usual, like the raising of Lazarus in John 11. What happened to Lazarus was sensational. He died and then came to life again. Although we don't have any further records, he eventually died again. There may have been others who arose from the dead. We recall Lazarus, and it's interesting, and we think: "Wasn't that an amazing event!"

But over against "Once upon a time," there is "Once for all time."

When we deal with the fact that God became one of us truly and died and rose again, that is: "Once for all time." What God has done changes everything. It's that for which there is no analogy. There is no parallel. It's not just unique. Everything in a way is unique. It is that which is *sui generis*. It's God against God and God wins. It's that kind of thing which is everything, and it is spelled out in the last verse of the Gospel of Matthew where it says: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt 28:20). Shazam!

How does this apply in concrete terms now for us as we think about how the Lord comes in a little bit of water and his Word and we call it Baptism, and in little bit of wine and bread and his Word, and we call it the Lord's Supper?

First of all, he's not present in everything that is food. In a way as God the Creator he is the one who creates and sustains everything. Therefore we give thanks for food. In a way he is present everywhere that way. He's God.

At the same time, he is present particularly in his Word of promise in the Word and water of Baptism and in the bread and wine of Communion because that is his command and his promise. Very particularly.

We rebel at these limits. We think: "Well, no, Lord. You have to do it other ways. Lord you need to be present to me at the top of the mountain." The Lord says: "That's not my command and promise."

Or we say: "Lord, I have to feel it right or think it right, experience it right." To which the answer is: God became one of us and died and rose again and that's not according to our way of thinking or understanding or feeling. He does it his way, not our way. It's here, not elsewhere. When we gather this way.

A few years ago the Vatican changed the wording in its translation of the Mass for the whole Roman Catholic Church. The change came from Rome and that made it authoritative, except it provoked a big battle in Germany. In the German Catholic Church the Cardinals, Archbishops, and Bishops said in effect: "We will not accept this translation you have given us for the Mass." The problem had to do with the very words of institution. The wording had been "This is for all." The Vatican changed the wording to: "This is for many."

The Vatican wanted to follow the Greek. The New Testament Greek says in four places: "This is for many." There is no question of that.

But Jesus did not speak Greek. He spoke Aramaic. In both the Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany the church leaders are often professors who know this translation problem. They know that the original Aramaic term behind the Greek doesn't say "for many" it says "for all."

What the German Catholic hierarchy – the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops – said to Rome was that you can't do that to us because the Protestants will eat us alive.

When we celebrate communion, we say: "We have to do it right." But of course if we were really going to do it right, we'd have to do it in Aramaic. Or which translation would we use, because translations vary? Which words? What gestures are right? Do we turn the right way? Or whatever.

But of course it's God's doing. It's here. Not on a mountain top, not how we think about it. It's his doing. In 1 Cor 10:16-17 Paul writes:

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

We are one loaf. We are one together. That's because that event was and is for all time. It's not just "Once upon a time" that Jesus died and rose again. It's "Once for all time." That changes everything.

1 Cor 12:27 says: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." We are a body, one body. It doesn't say we're like a body, as a metaphor or simile. It says we are his body.

(In Colossians 1:18 and Ephesians 1:22-23, Christ is the head of the body, implying a hierarchical ecclesiology. In contrast, in 1 Cor 12:12-27 the body is the priesthood of all believers [note verse 16: "And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body."] "Pauline ecclesiology is basically Christology. . . . In a sentence – every Christian in his own place, in his particular situation, with his specific capacities and weaknesses, may and must be a 'place holder' for Christ until death.") See Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, 102-21, here 117 and 119.)

We are one body. That's the big event that happened once for all, and this event continues among us through his Word in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We are one body, not like a body. It is one body including participating and communing as his adopted sons and daughters who have been made heirs, as it says in Romans 8:17 and Galatians 4:7. It changes everything.

That's why when we come together for the preaching of the Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, it shouldn't be dull. We tend to think we must be solemn. It doesn't mean that this place becomes a house of business. It is a house of prayer. At the same time, we remember that we are then part of and continuing that which changes everything. Death is over. We're celebrating the resurrection. Perhaps we should have fireworks and shout Halleluia! Let there be hilarity (*hilaritas*). Everything has changed in his Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper and forever. Amen