

Maundy Thursday  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

March 24, 2016  
Rev. Paul Moore

## The Altar of God

A middle-aged African American woman took the podium at the Convention of the Diocese of Dallas a number of years ago. As priest in that Diocese I was in attendance. She told the most startling of stories. She had decided to go to the Episcopal church in her East Texas town. She arrived to find she was the only African-American in attendance, but being an Episcopalian, she knew the service and participated fully. When the time came she went forward with everyone else and took communion. Afterwards she found out that the week following the priest had visited the two people who had knelt beside her, and apologized to them that they had to take communion next to a black person.

In my humble opinion the priest's behavior violated one of the central elements of this holy meal. At this meal we are all one, and we are all equally acceptable. On one hand, the person beside me doesn't matter at all. It could be the Archbishop of Canterbury, or a meth-head from the wrong side of town. Before God, at this table, we are all equal, and before God, at this table, we are all accepted.

And at the same time the person beside me makes all the difference in the world, for that person is my sister or my brother, a fellow-traveler with whom, like it or not, my life is intricately and inextricably entwined.

The great Augustine of Hippo preached a sermon in the year 408 to the "infantes," those who were preparing to be baptized at the Great Vigil of Easter, and then take communion for the first time. Here is an excerpt:

*How can bread be his body? And the cup, or what the cup contains, how can it be his blood?" The reason these things, brothers and sisters, are called sacraments is that in them one thing is seen, another is to be understood. What can be seen has a bodily appearance, what is to be understood provides spiritual fruit. So if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the apostle telling the faithful, You, though, are the body of Christ and its members (1 Cor. 12:27). So if it's you that are the body of Christ and its members, it's the mystery meaning you that has been placed on the Lord's table; what you receive is the mystery that means you. It is to what you are that you reply Amen, and by so replying you express your assent. What you hear, you see, is The body of Christ, and you answer, Amen. So be a member of the body of Christ, in order to make that Amen true.*

The Holy Meal is not just magical food that makes us good people. The Holy Meal is an exercise in unitive living—not dualistic living, like the priest who could not accept a black person at the rail, but unitive living, that place that sees the whole and loves as God loves—unconditionally and without measure.

This meal manifests the deep reality of who we are becoming. Think with me if you will. Some of you have already heard this before, but here it goes as refresher. We communicate in bread and wine. Where does the wine come from? The wine comes from a winery that gets the grapes from the field, presses them with machinery made in the iron, steel, lubricant, plastics, and a host of other industries, is transported by vehicles that incorporate the whole transportation industry, and employs people like you and me who have families, children and histories, gathering up all of society and humanity, paying taxes to the government, drawing in all of human politics and governance—you see my point. Wine is a symbol of all of creation.

Where does the bread come from? It comes from nuns who bake flour into flat loaves and punch out fish-food wafers for us, and that flour comes from wheat farmers who drive tractors, have families and send their kids to school. Their wheat goes to granaries who dry it and package it and ship it to mills, who grind the flour and put it in bags, and send it to the nuns—again, you see my point. Bread gathers up all that is our common life and lays it on the Altar.

Each of these is a symbol of the whole of creation. As the good Augustine says, it is we, the mystery that is us, that is on the Altar, in all our permutations, ramifications, alterations, obfuscations and glorifications.

Now notice in John 1 where the evangelist tells us that through the Word all things were made. It is from the hand of the second person of the Trinity, who we come to know in Jesus Christ, that we have this bread and wine as products of and symbols of the whole of creation, including ourselves. Who is this Christ who is the creator of all things that will shortly lay on our Altar? 1 Corinthians 15:22: “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” Again, later in the same chapter, vs. 45: “So it is written: ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.” In Paul's thought Christ is the recapitulation of Adam. What Adam was, Christ is, what Adam could not do, Christ does. Christ is the fulfillment of what Adam was intended to do. What does "Adam" mean? It means "red," as in red dirt, and it becomes in Hebrew the word for humanity. It brings us back to what Augustine teaches us. What lays on the Altar is the whole of Creation, including ourselves, but not as we normally conceive of ourselves, rather ourselves as constituent parts of that great unity that is creation as seen by the eye of God.

In other words, we are on the Altar, not ourselves as our ego defines us, but ourselves as children of God.

What, then, does it mean to share in this meal? It means to lay yourself on the Altar. Being on the Altar is to declare yourself part of God's great unity of creation, part of the great whole. It means to recognize that you are not the center of the universe, that the world you create around yourself is not necessarily the world that is laid on the Altar, and that the World on the Altar has the right to correct your self-constructed world. It means to commit yourself to ever increasing awareness of God's whole, and to struggle with those forces that would coopt that whole and destroy it for their own ends.

Being on the Altar is to see who and what else is on the Altar. Everyone else is on the Altar. Everyone else is as accepted as you are. Everyone else is as much a recipient of God's gracious, merciful love as you are. You are one of many—you have a community. Everything else is on the Altar, sun, moon and stars, birds, fish, trees, mountains and rivers, all are part of the great One that God creates and God redeems. All reflect something of the nature of God. You have a context, a place, and a charge to care.

Being on the Altar is to see what God is doing in the world. God is bringing to light the great unity of all things. God is grieved by those who would sacrifice the unity for their own ends, and God expects us to be involved as well.