

Pentecost 9, Proper 11
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

July 17, 2016
Rev. Paul Moore

We

I'm back from school. You all have been incredibly patient with me while I have been gone these four trips over two years. Now I have finished my classroom work. I have a couple of papers to prepare to finish up those courses, and then I'm off and launched on my dissertation work. My topic will be (not surprisingly) multicultural ministry in the Diocese of the Rio Grande.

In preparation for one of my classes I read a book that took a deep look at our liturgy. The author critiqued it in terms of history. He gave the historical context in which certain actions in the liturgy developed, and challenged the use of them in light of improved theology. Case in point: During the early centuries of the Church the presider at the Eucharist was the Bishop. Eucharistic Prayers were generally not set, they were prayed extemporaneously. The sense of the meeting was that the Bishop presided over the gathered community of faith, and the celebration of the Eucharist was a community affair.

As the Middle Ages rolled in the role of the Church became more and more aligned with the political structures of the day. Priests became an elite class with the power to effect the mystery of the Mass on behalf of the people. Mass was said in Latin, which most people didn't understand, for most people were illiterate. The Mass, especially the consecration of the elements, became the sole purview of the priestly class. Set forms were required in order to ensure validity, and more and more the people did not actually receive of the elements. The miracle of transubstantiation happened at the words of institution, the words of Jesus, which of course, the people did not understand so a bell was rung at those times so that the people knew when the great event was happening. The elevation of the host and the chalice was done in order to give the people a chance to adore Christ in sacramental form before them. One writer of the times talks about "communion by sight." This led to monstrances, services of the adoration of the hosts, and concern for the safety of the little piece of bread. Crumbs falling on the floor were a problem—here's Jesus spread out under our feet! Taking the host in an unworthy fashion was enough of a trauma that some fell ill just from fear of divine retribution. All kinds of devices were created to protect the host from desecration, including communicating on the tongue to keep people from squirrelling the magic wafer away to use as a talisman. More and more masses were said in private by just the priest in petition to God for some purpose, to get someone out of purgatory, etc.

The author of this book shows how our current Book of Common Prayer has sought to recapture the early view of the Sacrament as a community celebration of the presence of Christ in the Body of Christ. We have rules that do not allow me to celebrate the sacred mysteries alone—I must have a congregation. I am, according to him, not celebrant, but presider. We are the celebrants, all of us together. Without the we there is no I; without the congregation there is no celebration, for the celebration is the celebration of who we are in Christ.

The author concludes that we should not elevate the elements at the words of institution because that implies a mediaeval understanding of the Eucharist. There he and I part ways. Yes, this is the history, but history is only a foundation for the present, not a determiner of it. I believe we have the opportunity today to recapture the best of the early Church and symbolize it using all the resources of our rich and long tradition. It is a matter of education of God's people to think for ourselves. To cut to the chase, what CAN the elevation of the elements at the Eucharist mean for us today that is faithful to the tradition AND relevant to our current understanding of the Church?

Let's lay this over this morning's celebration. At the announcement time we will commission those of us going

to Honduras. We go because we feel constrained by the love of God to share that love with those who have less than we. We know that going with medicines in hand will mean returning with joy in our hearts. The blessings of God will flow because Americans and Hondurans will gather together as one Body of Christ to do good things in the world.

Our journey does not really make sense outside a concept of the universal Body of Christ. That body is precisely what we celebrate this morning at the Eucharist. The holding up of the elements is not so you can adore a distant God through eyes alone, but that we might recognize how this meal makes us who we are. It is God who is elevated, yes, but it is also WE who are elevated. It is WE, the body of Christ, as Paul says in our second lesson, who are the living, sacramental presence of Christ in the world. The elements of communion are God's guarantee of that fact, God's part in making this a reality.

If we elevate the host and chalice it is to see in it ourselves—and the Hondurans, and our city of Silver City, our county and our state, our nation, and our world. It is to see the Gila Wilderness alongside the pine-covered mountains of Honduras, caught up in the redemptive work of God in Christ with us, and it is to know that as we do this good work we ARE one with the Hondurans, and with one another and with all the people of God.

We have three grandchildren which whom we had a delightful time several weeks ago. They live in Midland and Alpine, TX. Our little Josh, before our visit, kept insisting to his mommy that they had to be ready. "We have to be READY," he kept saying! (Gotta love him!) They may live in Texas, but they live in our hearts as well. They are never far from our thoughts, or we from theirs. Across the miles we are still one family.

Only 6 people from our neck of the woods are going to Honduras. The rest of you are staying hom—but you do not stay home. We take you with us in offerings of toiletries and dollars, in prayers and in our hearts, and in our communication with you while we are away. And we do not go. We stay behind, in your prayers and thoughts, in your concern for us, in your sharing in our joy of doing the work of God, and in your continuation of the work of God that is ours to do in this place.

What we do extends our presence across the miles affirming that the Body of Christ is larger than we. It is not hampered by political or socio-economic boundaries, geography or culture. It is WE who go, all of us, and it is WE who stay, all of us, and just as WE celebrate the Eucharist together this morning, it is WE who do this good work, by the call of God in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.