

## **“Hope for the World”**

**Text: Luke 4:16-21; I Corinthians 11:17-26**

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*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,  
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. I Corinthians 11:26*

Last Sunday, the point was made from this pulpit that what lies beneath the current economic crisis is actually a moral crisis of major proportion. We spoke of greed and selfishness, lassitude of oversight, and a lack of regard for the truth. In an article in the *Washington Post* this week, eminent sociologist Robert Bellah offers his take on the current situation. “The economic crisis,” he claims, “is a symbol of the imbalance of our values. Extreme individualism runs against Christianity and against all other religions as well. There is nothing religious about hatred of the state, the distribution of goods only through the free market, and abandoned regulations. Yes, in America, we celebrate entrepreneurship and the pioneering spirit of our forbearers. But Americans have always been at our best when we balance our belief in fairness and the common good with our own aims and ambitions. The problem is we have lost our balance. At the Democratic convention we were told that anyone could do whatever he or she wanted if only they worked hard enough, and at the Republican convention, we were told that we no longer needed the state for anything. Where are the religious leaders in this atmosphere? Imagine what would happen if our religious leaders went out there and mobilized their flocks, telling them to go vote, and to go to the polls with slogans like this one on their minds: ‘I am my brother’s keeper.’ Imagine congregations mobilized to fight for income fairness rather than to oppose gay marriage. As of today, the cost of our ignorance of the consequences of greed is in the trillions. Who will pay the costs? Our energy future, our schools, our healthcare, our children. It is time,” Bellah says, “that we took a spiritual look at the system we have created. Perhaps from now on the market needs to open with a prayer instead of a bell.” (1)

Our political leaders have been talking about Main Street and Wall Street. They have been talking about what happens around the kitchen table, the kitchen table being presumably the place where families look at their bills, make out their shopping lists, and wrestle with the effects of the recession. Today, I want to talk about another table, the table of our Lord, where for 2000 years people have gathered to break bread together. Now, before we are tempted to pretty it up and put halos on the heads of everyone sitting around it, I want us to set aside

our rose-colored glasses and look realistically at the way things were being done at the table in Corinth. If you turned in your pew Bible to the passage I read, you probably noticed that that heading for the passage reads “Abuses at the Lord’s Supper.” Abuses at the Lord’s Supper? Paul berates the Corinthians for having divided into factions. No matter how much you and I find ourselves divided up into factions, ideological groups, whatever - it is not congruent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Clearly, if you read the New Testament, you realize that God is opposed to factions, according to Paul. Over and over again, he talked about the unity of the body of Christ and the difficulty that comes when one group feels superior to another.

I have been saving this story to share with you for over a year now. It might not even fit in the sermon, but I love the story, so I am going to tell it. There was a Presbyterian minister who was visited by the president of Presbyterian Women in his congregation. She said to him, “Please, come to the fellowship hall. We would like to have a meeting with you there.” The minister admits that he is not the smartest person in the PCUSA, but he was smart enough to know that when the women summon you to the fellowship hall, you had better get nervous.

So he went. He asked, “What seems to be the problem?”

“The Catholics want to borrow our roasters,” he was told. Let me say that again – “the Catholics want to borrow our roasters.” It seems that the Presbyterian women had a custom of cooking an annual turkey dinner that a thousand people attended, and food was served out of these big, plug-in roasters that are sometimes treated, the pastor suggests, as if they were made out of gold.

He said, “We have 20, no 30 roasters. We keep them under lock and key, and now the local Catholics want to borrow four of them.” The pastor wanted to head off trouble at the pass. He said, “Maybe I could just put the roasters in my truck and deliver them.”

“Oh no,” they said. “We don’t want them to borrow the roasters.”

“Why not?” the pastor asked.

“What if something happened to them?”

“Do we have any reason to believe that the Catholics are going to be harder on the roasters than the Presbyterians?” the pastor asked.

Another said, “Well, I know they’re not very expensive, so the Catholics can buy their own!”

The conversation continued that way until someone said, “I’ll go buy four roasters. I’ll pay for them myself, and I’ll donate them to the Catholic Church.”

One of the other ladies spoke up and said, "All right, but don't tell them they are from us, because that will make us look bad." (2)

Church conflicts, feelings of superiority: they are everywhere. One of the great controversies, I understand, in recent years at Morningside, had to do with the pew cushions. We ought to write a book and show the rest of the world how to settle a conflict. Have you noticed that there is a cushion on the first row, but not on the second, a cushion on the third row, but not on the fourth? If you want a cushion, fine. And if you don't want a cushion, fine. Matter settled. Let's go help out at the food bank - I like that.

I cannot remember a time when our Presbyterian denomination has been more divided, certainly not since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Presbyterians divided up over, among other things, the issue of slavery. Today, the issues are the authority of Scripture, ordination issues, styles of worship. If you read national church news, you will see that the church is at a fever pitch of factionalism, as is the nation.

I think we Georgia fans - I mean, the University of Georgia - are really going to miss Larry Munsen, now that he is retired. We are going to miss a lot about him - the vividness of his language, the passion of his commitment to the Bulldogs. What I'm going to miss most about the gravelly-voiced announcer is his regular use of the pronoun "we". "We're at the 30 yard line; now we're at the 10; we're over the goal line! Touchdown, Bulldogs!" No matter what your politics were, no matter whether you listened to the game in the garage while drinking a beer and changing the oil in your car, or whether you were perched on a silk sofa in a penthouse on Peachtree, sipping Chardonnay, we were all in the game together, just as God wants us to be in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Don't forget - any time you start a church argument, you are not reflecting the will of God. That is not to say there are not deep differences among us, but what is more basic than our differences is our unity in Christ.

It is hard to sit down to supper with people whom you have just been talking ugly about. This was happening at the table in Corinth. Paul didn't like it. The divisions really bothered him. The other thing that bothered him was that when time came to eat, some people just went ahead and ate, not caring in the least whether anybody else got something to eat or not. "Why do you feel as if you have the right to just belly on up to the table like that?" he said. "If you're going to act that way, just stay home. Don't show contempt for the Church of God, and don't humiliate those who have nothing so that they go away from the Lord's table with nothing. Here's how you ought to act." Paul then explains to them what had been passed on from the Lord to him, and that he was now passing on to them. It was all about giving, all about sharing and thanksgiving: *This is my body, broken for you.* Whatever the opposite of greed is, my friends, this is it: *My body broken for*

*you*. This is the opposite of greed, the Savior's body broken. It is at the other end of the spectrum from the attitude that says, "I need to get mine first."

Every time we come to the table of our Lord, we are drawn into the ancient story of Jesus and his self-giving love. We are drawn into the story of God's new covenant with the human race, a covenant of grace, forgiveness, and salvation, sealed in the blood of God's own son.

At that first Last Supper, not the one in Corinth, but the one in Jerusalem, Jesus was not looking for perfect human beings. He was sitting around the table that night with Judas who was to betray him, Peter who denied him three times, Thomas the doubter. No one is expected to be an angel. But clearly, we have it in us not to be factionalized. Clearly we have it in us to put the needs of other people on the same level as our own needs. So please, so PLEASE, don't be so pushy and selfish. This is not just about table manners. This is the way we are to act in the world. The table is the paradigm for the reality made possible in Christ. Don't be pushy, don't be selfish, make room at the table for those who have little or none.

I like the way we Presbyterians serve communion. We pass the loaf and the cup one to the other, each one serving the next one. But I also find it meaningful to receive communion in a Catholic church – no, can't do that. Excuse me. I'm a Protestant...in an Episcopal Church, for example. I like to hold my hands as an empty vessel. I like to hold my mouth open, empty too, because it reminds me that in the end, all any of us bring is our need. None deserves more than any of the rest of us.

What a great opportunity we have now, we Americans, to rethink our manners, and perhaps our tendency to try to get to the table before everybody else and fill our plates two or three times before anybody else ever gets there the first time. I believe the crisis in our economy offers us a great opportunity to form deeper bonds with the human family, of which we are a part. I believe that America's faith communities have a great opportunity to come together and be fed spiritually, so that we can go out to live joyfully and hopefully the story of God's love revealed in Christ.

How do we do it? For starters, we can follow his example. Jesus laid out his action plan in his first public sermon: *The Spirit of the living God is upon me, and I'm going to direct my attention toward those who live on the margins of society, the poor, the oppressed, toward those who are all balled up in their sins and cannot live whole lives, toward those who are weighed down by debts every kind. I want to free them to live in the light of God's gracious love.*

In recent days, I have heard two or three members of Morningside express anxiety about our church - we have the building project. The economy is in bad, bad shape. How are we going to fare during these choppy days? I want to tell

you, as one of your pastors, that there is nothing to worry about. For one thing, worry won't help. Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you anywhere. The deeper reason we need not worry is that God is at work in the world, now. Just as much as it has always been, God's life-giving, life-renewing Spirit is on the loose out there, and we have been given our job. Ours is the wonderful mission to be the Spirit-filled body of Christ. I think the church is at its best in choppy times, when things get tough. We are able to separate the silly from the essential. We have the directions to living water. We have the recipe for the bread of life. We know that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. We know that God's grace is sufficient for every single human need. We know that there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. These are the things we know, and so we take a deep breath and relax. And then get going.

World communion Sunday enables me to go, "Whew." Because today, we affirm that the church is larger than just us. The church is more than just our particular stream in the great river of Christianity. We are a part of a whole. The holy Catholic Church, we call it, the word "catholic" meaning "including a wide variety." Wouldn't it be wonderful if a wide variety of people of faith around the world began to address in courageous ways, the growing gap between the rich and the poor in what is surely a global crisis? Wouldn't it be wonderful if a wide variety of people of faith began to exert our influence in addressing the ecological challenges that face us? I heard E.J. Dionne say that the markets of the world and not the governments of the world are where the power will lie in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There we have it - a new job description. We need to help bring spiritual values to the markets of the world. We do that by what we say, how we work, how we spend our money, and how we make our investments. There is no time like the present to join in God's long-range project, which is the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

I have mentioned before a trip that I took with other Presbyterian pastors in the 1980s to visit several African countries. One of my most vivid memories is of our first morning in Ghana, after two days of long airplane travel, and a harrowing drive down completely dark and bumpy roads. We arrived in the middle of the night at a girls' school that was to be our first home away from home. Exhausted, we fell into bed. The next morning we got up and were faced with a real challenge in our preparations for the day, because in the two restrooms that had been assigned to our group, there was no soap, no paper towel, no toilet paper. At breakfast, one of the ministers in our group stood up and said, "I have a confession to make. Last night while you were asleep, I got up, and I went into the restrooms, and I took the soap, the paper towel, and the toilet tissue. I hid it in the duffel bag I had brought to take back home filled with presents. I'm going to put it all back now. Please forgive me. I was frightened that I wouldn't have enough." Isn't it amazing how fear can turn even the best of us into something none of us would ever want to be?

Toward the end of the trip, we were in what was then called Zaire. I met a little boy at one of our mission hospitals, who was dying of hunger. He had been brought in too late to reverse the ravages of starvation. I leaned over his bed, touched his head, said a prayer, then turned to leave. Over my shoulder I heard his fragile little voice speak to me. "Moyo," he said. "Moyo," a common greeting in the Chaluba dialect, used in the same way you and I might say "hello" or "good morning," or "goodbye". The meaning of the word is, "I wish you life."

Jesus came that all of God's children might have life, or at least a good shot at it. Now is the time to remember that everything is not just about us. Rabbi Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, then, what am I?"

May the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be a blessing to all the world today. Amen.

(1) Timothy Shriver, "Losing the Spirit on Wall Street," *the Washington Post*, 9/29/08.

(2) Clint Loveall, "A New Year's Sermon," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 12/31/07.