

Sunday, October 7, 2007
Fairmount Presbyterian Church, Cleveland Heights
Rev. Kent M. Organ, Guest Preacher
Texts: Isaiah 2:1-4; I Corinthians 11:17-29

When the Walls Come Down

“For all who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves” (I Cor. 11:29).

Now, that is not a very friendly text. Please bear with me.

Harvard professor Robert Coles¹[1] used to go to the Bowery in New York City to visit Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Not long before her death, he heard Dorothy Day say this: “Here on this one small island in the universe, God has put so many of us to live. The earth is an island. [And I] believe it would be better if we got to know one another, took an interest in one another, to be part of a community over a meal, to serve and be served.” She hesitated for a moment, and then she added, “I think Isaiah and Jesus explained this some time ago.”

I am grateful to the Session and to Pastor Louise Westfall for the invitation to be with you this morning, as your Ninetieth Anniversary celebration continues. I have missed being in community with you. For this return to occur on World Communion Sunday is moving to me. My first Sunday as your pastor was on this day sixteen years ago. Thank you for bringing me back.

“Here on this one small island God has placed so many of us to live... It would be better... to be part of a community over a meal...”

We gather in a sanctuary that was built during another time of global warfare. World War II has been remembered as “The Good War,” although, as Ken Burns’ new film made agonizingly clear, there is no such thing. I hope we all know this. Frank Halliday Ferris certainly did. Necessary? yes. But good? No.

¹[1] The reference to Robert Coles evokes the ministry of Associate Pastor David McMillan who studied at Harvard in the mid-1980s, and then shared learnings from Dr. Coles’ class on contemporary examples of faith in an adult education series at Fairmount.

Your story is intimately connected with the Second World War. It was just as the war was beginning for America that you built this “modest English country church” – that is how Dr. Ferris described it. My recollection is that, in 1942, the very last non-military use of steel from Cleveland’s Jones & Laughlin refinery was for the beams that support the Fairmount Church sanctuary roof.

When the war ended and the world emerged from the carnage and destruction, in addition to the Marshall Plan for physical restoration, church leaders saw the need for spiritual restoration. International retreat centers sprang up across Europe: Taizé in France, Agapé in Italy, to which Christians who had been killing each other came to pray together, and seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Peace centers were founded in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral in England, and the Berlin Cathedral in Germany. And during this time, Worldwide Communion Sunday was created, as a reminder that despite whatever divides us across the globe – history, geopolitics, language, class, race, whatever – this meal is tangible reminder that much deeper than all of that is our spiritual unity, our oneness, in Jesus Christ.

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But that has seldom been obvious, not even at the Lord’s Table, as we recognize in the reading from I Corinthians. Paul, the letter writer, was perturbed. Word had reached him that, in the new church he had planted in Corinth, communion was celebrated “in an unworthy manner.” What upset Paul was the way the participants were acting toward each other. He wrote, “When you come together, it is not for the better but for the worse.”

Apparently, what was happening was this: They met in one another’s homes, often in a large home. The Lord’s Supper was part of a common meal, an early version of the church potluck. The more well-to-do – those who didn’t have to work late into the day – arrived early, helped themselves to the food, and drank most of the wine, even to the point of intoxication. Some who arrived later went hungry because little was left.

Such distinctions of rank and status were not unusual in Greek culture. The more privileged customarily received more and better food than others. But Paul was outraged at this happening in the church. They had not “discern[ed] the body.” He told them, You are the Body of Christ. You are called to exemplify this identity of ours. Which you do not do when you act

callously toward your brothers and sisters. We are equal at Christ's Table. His guests. Remember – and honor – the self-giving love of Jesus, who scandalously invited everyone to his table, whoever showed up, including the wrong kind of people.

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In this morning's communion meal, we won't have to worry about anybody overeating or getting drunk – not on one morsel of bread or a single swallow of juice. And everybody will get the same amount. But still, that instruction to “discern the body” – to see how well, or whether, we exemplify the Body of Christ – that continues to apply.

This “discerning” that we are instructed to do turns up today at World Communion, when the walls come down. Here at table is not only the Fairmount body, or the Presbyterian body, or the American body of Christ, but the entire multi-colored, many-tongued, North and South, comfortable and war-torn, well-fed and starving, universal body. How discerning are we this day of the entire broken body that belongs to Christ?

Years ago, in the spring of 1931, two international students were attending Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. One, from France, was named Jean Lassere; the other, a German, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer.^{2[2]} The new movie, “All Quiet on the Western Front,” was playing in the city, and one night the two of them went to see it together. The film was based on a German novel about World War I, the so-called Great War, “the war to end all wars.” The theater was full. The entire audience was American, except for Bonhoeffer and Lassere. The film was made from the standpoint of the German soldiers. And so, the audience immediately sympathized with the Germans. When they killed French soldiers on the screen, the crowd laughed and applauded. On the other hand, when German soldiers were wounded and killed, there was a great silence and a sense of deep emotion in the theater. Decades later, Jean Lassere recalled,

This was difficult for both of us, because we were seated next to each other,

^{2[2]} A reference to Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us of a lecture by Pastor Henry Andersen at Case-Western Reserve, as well as my public interview of Bonhoeffer's nephew, Maestro Christoph Von Dohnanyi, on the 50th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Dietrich, a German, and I, a Frenchman... For us, it was a profound experience.

From a fraternal point of view, it touched me to see how he couldn't do enough

to console me, to be kindly to me after the movie when we had gone out. I was

very affected, and he was very affected, but because of me.

And then, reflecting back on that night so long ago, Jean Lassere wrote,

I think it was there and then both of us discovered that the communion, the community of the Church is much more important than the national community.

The fundamental challenge is for us to see, to discern. Because only then, only after the walls have come down and we recognize the global community in Christ that we are – not just “are called to be,” but that, in Christ, we are – only then, when we have profoundly discerned that, will we feel the urgency to act accordingly.

You have a proud history of action on behalf of Christ's universal body, in this city and beyond: from the Inner City Protestant Parish and Project Renewal, the Cleveland Covenant Concept and United WECAN! the Heights Youth Club and ongoing relations with the church in Ethiopia, to whatever may emerge from your Diversity Council or from cooperative initiatives for “the salvation of the city.”^{3[3]}

The call to action is to us as individuals also, if we discern the whole body that is Christ's. People like ourselves, who have influence, what might we be able to do? Here at Fairmount, some words of Jesus immediately come to mind – you know the ones – “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.”^{4[4]} Here, at the universal table of our Lord, I wonder: what is required of us voters, us letter writers, us contributors to candidates and political parties? What could we affect as people within institutions who have expertise, as investors, as board members, as international travelers? Where might this day's Table-

^{3[3]} The phrase references a sermon recently preached at Fairmount Church by Pastor Louise Westfall.

^{4[4]} In my experience, Luke 12:48 is often quoted within the Fairmount community because, in this Scripture verse, Jesus Christ underlines the responsibility of those who have and who exercise significant resources.

discernment, this day's Body-of-Christ-discernment lead your imagination, your resolve, your daring?

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Sixteen years ago this Sunday, I concluded my inaugural sermon by telling you about the Association of Space Explorers. This is an organization formed by astronauts from many countries. They collaborate because of an eagerness to share their remarkable perspective on planet earth with the rest of the human family.

Muhammed Ahmad Faris, a Syrian, described our planet as “indescribably beautiful, with the scars of national boundaries gone.”

Aleksei Leonov, a Russian cosmonaut, saw earth as “small, light blue, and so touchingly alone, our home that must be defended like a holy relic.”

Bin Salman al-Saud, a Saudi Arabian space traveler, observed, “The first day or so we all pointed to our [own] countries. The third or fourth day we were all pointing to our continents. By the fifth day, we were aware of only one earth.”

And Edgar Mitchell, a U.S. astronaut, said, “The peaks [of my time in space] were the recognition that this is a harmonious, purposeful, creating universe. The valleys came in recognizing that humanity wasn't behaving in accordance with that knowledge.”^{5[5]}

“Here on this one small island God has placed so many of us to live... It would be better... to be part of a community over a meal, to serve and be served” and then to act in accordance with what – here, in Christ – we know.

^{5[5]} from *The Home Planet*, Kevin W. Kelley, editor, for the Association of Space Explorers (Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1988)