

Body of Christ:

Everything I Need to Know I Learned at the Communion Table

God touches us through Jesus. At the communion, table Jesus touches us when his body is broken open for us. Broken open to heal us. Broken open to fight the powers that control the system. Broken open to bind us to one another. Broken open, as our churches should be. As Jesus' body was broken open for us in history, and again at every Eucharistic celebration, Jesus touches us at the place where we come together as a community to know our God. The place where all should be welcome, where all become part of the body of Christ. The place where we can not only learn, but also experience the richness of a physical, communal act of worship that is a salvific gift from God. At the table, we learn that Jesus had a body, that Jesus is a powerful experience of God's love, about God's dream for the world, and about the church's role in making that dream come true.

Christ as Fully Human

"For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. . ." Colossians 2:9

Christ had a body. A fully human body. For some, this is the scandal of the cross. "Traditionally, [the body] has been viewed as something to be overcome in order to receive the joys of heaven. This is paradoxical since probably the most important article of Christian faith is that God became man."¹ Christ bled, felt pain, hunger, sadness, and hugs from others. After all, as Vítor Westhelle writes in *The Scandalous God*, "In other words, the scandal of the cross can only be maintained if it also remains as a scandal, like a thorn, to our statutes of reason, no matter what canonic or confessional form they take."² Recognizing that Jesus had a real body

¹ Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart. Introducing Body Theology. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998) 15.

² Vítor Westhelle. The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006) 48.

that felt real pain would have been quite scandalous for a Greco-Roman world where mind and body were separate. A world where, because Jesus was God, Jesus could not have suffered. People find this scandal in all kinds of ways. Some, as detailed in *The Scandalous God* try to avoid it altogether. Some, as detailed in James Cone's *The God of the Oppressed* find the scandal by talking about a black God.³ I find the scandal and the Good News at the communion table. The table where we see the red wine and remember the blood of Jesus. The table where we remember the pain of Jesus' hands as those nails were driven through them. "It is the disabled God who is present at the Eucharist table – the God who was physically tortured, arose from the dead, and is present in heaven and on earth, disabled and whole."⁴

Although for some the cross has been sanitized by removing the broken body of Jesus⁵, for me the cross is a reminder of the Eucharist and of the broken body of Christ. It is a reminder that Jesus understands physical pain and that God loves humanity so much that God wanted to have a real, physical human body. This means that, contrary to a world that is obsessed with harmful mind/body dualism, God actually *cares* about the human body. "For he could not in any sense be called creator unless he is creator of the material of which the things created have in their turn been made."⁶ In addition, not only did God create our bodies, but God also wants us to know Her, through Jesus, in our bodies. ". . . [T]he things made fell far short of being able to comprehend and know their maker . . . For what profit to the creatures if they knew not their maker?"⁷ It is the physical body of Jesus that allows us to know something of our maker. Jesus teaches us that sin is not the final word. "In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the

³ James H. Cone. *God of the Oppressed*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

⁴ Nancy L. Eiesland. *The Disabled God: Toward a Libratory Theology of Disability*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994)107.

⁵ Vitor Westhelle, Class lecture (lecture for Systematic Theology II, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, IL, 26 February 2007).

⁶ Athanasius. "On the Incarnation." In Edward R. Hardy and Cyril C Richardson., Eds. *Christology of the Later Church Fathers*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) 56.

⁷ Athanasius., 65.

suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the *imago Dei*.”⁸

How can this one, complete with scars, be more than just the image of God, but actually God?

Christ as Fully Divine

Christ’s divinity is affirmed in the Lutheran belief that in communion, Christ is present in, with, and under the bread and wine through the word. It is the full divinity of Jesus that allows him to come to us in the bread and wine. It is the fully divine Christ who suffers, and the fully divine Christ who is resurrected with scars. “One has to be constantly reminded of the fact that the resurrected body carries with it the scars of the cross.”⁹

Through Christ, all parts of the Trinity gain intimate knowledge about what it means to be human, to have a body, and to live on this planet. “This radical immanentism of God’s own self in creation defies with embodiment the powers that work to bring the ‘poem’ of God to naught.”¹⁰ It is precisely this intimate knowledge that allows for God to be part of all things, but also to transcend all things. It is this that allows Jesus to be fully human and fully divine. “The consequence is that although the corporeal mode of Christ’s presence is limited in time and space, Christ’s *embodiment* (‘even according to humanity’) is not limited to that corporeal mode of presence in Jesus of Nazareth.”¹¹ If Jesus were only human, or only divine, and not truly both, then a true celebration of the fullness of the Eucharist would be impossible. It is the divinity and humanity of Christ that allows us to say that God is with us and cares for us. It allows us to affirm, “We are made whole in the midst of our brokenness.”¹²

Christ as Healer

⁸ Eiesland, 99.

⁹ Westhelle, 59.

¹⁰ Westhelle, 106.

¹¹ Westhelle, 29.

¹² Westhelle, 41.

There are many and varied experiences of the wholeness of God in communion. One of these comes from an older member of my church. Although hunched over from aging, when served communion, this man gets a twinkle in his eye and repeats the words “for me?” It is as though after an entire lifetime of taking communion, he still cannot believe that Jesus would come for him. That the reminders of Jesus’ humanity and divinity would be for him. Along with Nancy Eiesland, in communion I am reminded that Jesus understands my suffering, and that Jesus, through this meal, wants to touch my body, the body God created for me. “These physical mediations of God’s grace have often kept me related to my body at times when all of my impulses pushed me toward dissociating from the pain-wracked, uncomfortable beast.”¹³ Communion is a reminder that Jesus suffers, but He also brings liberation on a personal level. ““My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Mark 15:34) These words show the depth of Jesus’ agony and the pain of being abandoned by his father. But because he was one with divinity and humanity, the pain of the cross was God suffering for and with us so that our humanity can be liberated for freedom in the divine struggle against oppression.”¹⁴

Walter Wink shows how the primary example of God’s immanence is Jesus Christ, and that when bodies were healed it was a sign of God’s reign:

“Compassion is the hallmark of Jesus’ God. Consequently, Jesus’ healings and exorcisms, which play such a major role in his ministry, are not simply patches on a body destined for death regardless; they are manifestations of God’s Reign on earth now, an inbreaking of eternity into time, a revelation of God’s merciful nature, a promise of the restitution of all things in the heart of the loving Author of the universe.”¹⁵

¹³ Eiesland, 117.

¹⁴ Cone, 128.

¹⁵ Wink, Walter. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 134.

Pastor Keg Gahagen is currently serving a church in New York while continuing to live with cystic fibrosis. She says this about her experience of communion: “I think there is a moment of sacred silence in communion; that peace that passes all understanding which I encounter during communion, that for an instant I am not the one who is broken but Jesus in my hand.”¹⁶ It reminds her in a powerful way that Jesus knows what it is to be broken. It also gives her a powerful experience of God’s love for her through the communion meal. “I love that renewing aspect of [communion] and the healing in that. I learned a long time ago that healing is up to God not me or the doctors...but that little tiny bit of healing can really be a new start for my thinking each week.”¹⁷ This healing comes through the presence of God at the table and through the community that surrounds her. “The Eucharist of bread and wine is a sacrament of [Jesus’] body and blood whereby we become one with him and thus present to God, and God becomes present to us.”¹⁸ It is here, in God’s presence at the meal that we can accept that this personal healing goes far beyond ourselves.

Christ as Sacrament

This healing work of Jesus, though the Eucharist and other means, is salvation. This word is often used for the work of Jesus Christ, but the problem is that the word means many things to many different people. Mostly, people in the US especially, believe that God would not forgive us without Jesus. The problem with this belief is eloquently stated by Marcus J. Borg:

“It implies a limitation on God’s power to forgive; namely, God can forgive only if adequate sacrifice is made. It implies that Jesus’ death on the cross was necessary – not just the consequence of what he was doing, but that it had to happen, that it was part of God’s plan of salvation. It also introduces a requirement into the very center of our life with God: knowing about and believing in his sacrificial death.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Pastor Kathleen "Keg" Gahagen, Personal Communication, 16 June 2006.

¹⁷ Pastor Kathleen "Keg" Gahagen, Personal Communication, 16 June 2006.

¹⁸ Marcus J. Borg. *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003), 97.

¹⁹ Borg, 94.

Another major problem with this theology is that it creates an in-group and an out-group.²⁰ It means that some people are saved and some people are not. But, “Jesus is also a sacrament of God, a means through whom the Spirit of God becomes present”²¹. When Jesus becomes broken open for us in the Eucharistic meal, he is breaking open the kingdom of God in a new way, and breaking open the barriers between us and God.

This is in direct contrast to the theology that Jesus is necessary. There is a confession of faith in the Bible that ‘Jesus died for our sins.’ However, when one looks carefully at the context, one can see that this is exactly opposite of what Jesus was trying to do. Jesus’ act of death on the cross signified for people that the ‘principalities and powers’²² of the oppressive and exclusionary temple system of sacrifice did not need to exist. Once again, in the work of Jesus, we see that everything the cross stood for was scandalous. “That Jesus “died for our sins” was originally a subversive metaphor, not a literal description of either God’s purpose or Jesus’ vocation. It was a metaphorical proclamation of radical grace; properly understood, it still is.”²³ This radical grace was not a new plan, for our faith tradition tells us that God has always offered us grace and forgiveness, for example: “Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:5, NRSV).

However, Jesus does bring God’s grace to earth in a new, embodied way. “It is this new and radical immediacy of God that accounts for Jesus’ breaking through the legalisms and

²⁰ For a fuller discussion of this idea, see Borg, p. 172.

²¹ Borg, 97

²² See Walter Wink. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

²³ Borg, 95.

rigidities of the law to the very presence of God himself.”²⁴ As in the communion liturgy, when Christ’s body is broken for us, he sacramentally breaks open the kingdom of God, provides healing salvation, and gives us hope for the future.

Christ as Hope

Christ gives us hope in healing, in the radical sign of God’s grace, in the undoing of the temple system of worship, and in the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. This inbreaking happens in Jesus and at the communion table. It also happens wherever salvation occurs. Our eschatological hope for the future is about salvation. These are not completely separate concepts, for “Salvation is “the dream of God.” It is a dream for the earth. And it is a dream for us. It is about being born again and about the Kingdom of God. Salvation is about the transformation of life, individually and together, here and now. And the Bible speaks of these two transformations as an experience now, and as a hope for history, and as a hope that leads beyond history.”²⁵ One of the ways that God interacts with the world is by persuading us to perfect love. A perfect love that brings us to a new understanding of how the eschaton happens in our world, here and now.

“The interaction between God and the world is about eschatology. It is about helping the world to be the best that it can be. In a process eschatology, God accepts all that we do and continually persuades us to be more than what we are. God persuades us to be those creatures operating in love toward and with each other. Herein is eschatology redefined. There is no end. The end is not the end because God is luring us, over and over again, to perfect love.”²⁶

This is about how we, through and with the sacramental Jesus and all he does, become healing, eschatological, and salvific communities. God’s healing love is not a new story. “Ancient

²⁴, William V. Dych SJ *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press 1992) 59.

²⁵ Borg, 182-183

²⁶ Monica A. Coleman “The World At Its Best: A Process Construction of a Wesleyan Understanding of Entire Sanctification” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 37.2 (Fall 2002), 152.

Israel's story is a story of the creation of a new people, a nation, a community. Salvation is about life together. Salvation is about the peace and justice within the community and beyond the community."²⁷ It is the stories of the community that heal us, the story that we tell in communion, and the story of Jesus.

Christ as Community

We become salvific communities, in part, by telling stories. James Cone writes about the importance of this. "I am not imprisoned within my story. Indeed, when I understand truth as story, I am more likely to be open to other people's truth stories. As I listen to other stories, I am invited to move out of the subjectivity of my own story into another realm of thinking and acting. The same is true for others when I tell my story."²⁸ The Eucharistic meal involves us in Jesus' story. It involves us in the story of the church, of the existence of our specific congregation. It pulls us into a story of love and forgiveness. It also pulls us to meet someone else – the someone who hands us the bread and the wine. The someone who stands before or after me in line. The someones who sit next to me in the pews. Furthermore, no matter what the person next to me has done or said, no matter if they have money or not, have addictions or are free from them, we all get the same bread and the same wine. While Jesus affects each of us individually, the person of Jesus also draws us together to be one community working for justice and healing in the here and now.

²⁷ Borg, 178

²⁸ Cone, 94.

Christ as Church

The communion liturgy, and indeed most of this paper, reminds us that Jesus *was* in history. He had a body that was dead and resurrected. However, “he is also the divine one who transcends the limits of history by making himself present in our contemporary existence.”²⁹ It is not enough to just think about Jesus’ *wasness*. Even churches that celebrate communion as a remembrance acknowledge that Jesus *is* active in our world today. We can see this when the Eucharistic ritual is adapted to communities around the globe. It is this ritual that allows us to experience Jesus’ real presence in our lives and our community. It seems that the Eucharistic symbol also has implications for how we appropriate Jesus to look like us. Bread comes in many forms and shapes: dark, light, coarse, smooth, flat, fluffy, dense, with air bubbles and without, and in many different flavors. This is one way Jesus comes into our world today. It is how we can affirm pictures of Jesus of different races and in different settings. Picturing this, then, must also move us beyond our own community. These different pictures of Jesus and different types of bread draw us into remembering that we are communing not just with our congregation, but also with Christians throughout time and around the world. Communion is not a solitary event – it takes a worshipping community. It is in this community that we can remember to work for Christians who are oppressed. It is in the Eucharistic celebrations and all of its various forms that we are called to think of others, especially those who have been oppressed by life. “Here is of course the brokenness of people and their hearts and body and no one comes perfect to the table. However, some of us have our brokenness blaring out loud for the world to see.”³⁰

²⁹ Cone, 115.

³⁰ Pastor Kathleen "Keg" Gahagen, Personal Communication, 16 June 2006.

As above, communion is the ultimate reminder that Jesus was oppressed through the blood and the cross. This brings us into another story, the story of Christians who experience Jesus as the One who empowers them to work for the world of God's dream of freedom for all creation. "For Christians who have experienced the extreme absurdities of life, the Christological question is not primarily theoretical but practical. It arises from the encounter of Christ in the struggle of freedom."³¹ This story requires us to take our gift of grace, our encounter with Jesus at the table and in our lives, to work for freedom of all peoples. In the Eucharist, we get forgiveness of sins and a personal message that Jesus is for us. We are also pulled into a larger story of Christians around the world and those in our congregation. This powerful encounter with both the *wasness* and *isness* of Jesus at the same time can at last free us to work for the justice of all peoples as the body of Christ.

The Body of Christ

We are called by God to bring this salvation into our communities. We are called to carry on the work of Christ – offering salvation to those around us. "Through praying, loving, touching, welcoming, and healing, we build communities that teach and heal its participants. Individuals are not saved apart from the communities in which they participate."³² This way of thinking about salvific communities open us up to the fullness of Jesus and all that he accomplished in this world. "This means that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the sign or symbol in which God's saving will reach its full and irrevocable realization and manifestation, and this event in the history of Jesus is a unique event in the common history of which we are all a part."³³ This however, does not mean that Jesus started a new thing, or a new era of the world.

³¹ Cone, 100.

³² Monica A. Coleman, "Walking in the Whirlwind: A Whiteheadian-Womanist Soteriology," Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 2004, 226.

³³ Dych, 60.

Jesus, while being unique in history, is a continuation of God's healing participation (grace) in the world. Jesus coming does not mean that the world is about to end, as many early Christians believed and Christians continue to believe today in the US. Rather, it means that we have work to do, in the example of Christ.

If the church is to be the body of Christ and thus act as a salvific community for the world, it must take bodies seriously. "It was the body of Christ that took away the sins of the world. It is the body of Christ that brings redemption to the world and to the individual believer. The same body that many of the faithful consider themselves consuming in the Eucharist. This is a very earthy, fleshy, physical way to connect with one's God and should set the pattern for a positive approach to the body."³⁴ Any church that provides a positive approach to the body is salvific in my world. A church where my body is accepted as it is. A church where it is okay to feel physical pleasure and pain as part of God's creation. A place where Jesus' body being broken open is the kingdom of God breaking into my painful body and connecting me with God and others. A place where denial of the body or release from it are not salvation, but healing is. My body is constantly denying me total physical pleasure on this earth. To conceive of my faith, or my immortality, as another denial of bodily pleasure is not salvific for me. It is in fact hurtful and damaging and further splits my personhood. To conceive of my faith, personally or communally, as separate from my whole being is damaging to me, and to others.

For others, a positive approach to the body means talking about the body, especially the abused and oppressed body. We need to use our healing and eschatological hope to bring salvation. "Salvation comes through teaching, healing, remembering, honoring, possessing,

³⁴ Isherwood and Stuart, 16.

adopting, conforming, and creatively transforming.”³⁵ This creative transformation is our job, and we can do it with God’s help.

Christ as Healing Paradox

Ultimately, we experience Christ’s healing in the paradox of both/and. Christ is *both* fully human *and* fully divine. Christ is *both* healer *and* sacrament. Christ *both* is hope for today *and* was unique in history. Christ is *both* salvific community *and* a body. It is in the Eucharistic meal that we meet Jesus’ broken and fully human body that carries with it the divine presence and promise of new life. The table meal calls us to hear the words “broken for you,” but to hear them from another person in a communal ritual. The words surrounding the Eucharist remind us that Jesus was real in history and yet propels us to know Jesus in our context today. Jesus is present in his human body in history, is present in my body through creation and communion, and is present in and sustains the church, the body of Christ today. In the end, though, our words fall short to describe the awesome Fullness that is all of Christ. The one who had breath gives us breath to do Christ’s work in the world today. After all, “it is the breath that we exhale which allows us to utter words, even and above all those words that defy our comprehension.”³⁶ While experiencing Christ in the paradoxes that defy our comprehension, we encounter God through the church, the Body of Christ, and at the Eucharistic table, where we remember Christ’s body broken open for us and for the world.

³⁵ Coleman, (2004), 227.

³⁶ Westhelle, 32.

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