



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, October 26, 2008

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin

on

I Corinthians 10:15-24

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PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNION

What is “participation”? The word begins with “part,” and indeed we think of participation as having a part in something. One might participate in a group such as a sports team or a glee club; or one might participate in a joint project, such as the making of lunches for the soup kitchen. Whether in a group or in a function, to participate is to take a part.

To think about parts is generally to have some sort of mechanical image in front of us. If I am a player on the ball field, I may think of being a player as something like being a part of a working engine. When all the parts are put together in the right place—the pistons, the rods, the gaskets—when they are all connected the way they are supposed to be, then the engine runs smoothly. And when all the players on the team are there and are working together in the right way, the team plays—well it’s like, we might say, a well-oiled machine.

But this image is false. To participate in any truly human enterprise is *not*—not at all—to be like a part of a well-oiled machine. To participate, in fact, is not to be a part.

The problem with thinking about parts is that it causes us to think about people as individuals in hermetic isolation from one another. A part does not have to be connected to anything. It might well be, as we say, an interchangeable part. But people are not essentially disconnected individuals. People are not essentially interchangeable. Rather, it is our very identity to be related to one another.

Saint Paul brings up participation when he is dealing with an ethical-religious problem among the Corinthians. They thought that they were substantially disconnected from each other. They reasoned as follows: We know that the idols of our countrymen are phoney, bogus, empty; the only real God is the God we worship, the Father who raised his Son Jesus from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. Since the idols of our countrymen are completely false, any food that has been offered to them is totally unchanged by that offering; it is still just ordinary food. And so there

is no problem if we eat it. The truth in Christ has set us free from the idols, so we can eat their food with a clear conscience.

On the contrary, says Paul: by eating food offered to idols, you are giving a false message to people who are weaker than you. They may look at you and conclude, since you eat idol-food, there must be something to this business of idols. And they might abandon the truth and lose their way. By claiming your freedom to act according to your rights, you endanger the spiritual welfare of people who are not so strong as you.

Paul is telling them: just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *ought* to do it. Although it wouldn't harm you as an individual, you need to consider whether it will harm others. For you are connected to them.

How are we connected? It's called *participation*. Paul hits them in the guts of their argument, with food. Not the food offered to idols, but the food offered in Christian worship. *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?* Participation is communion, and Christian communion is participation in the blood of Christ. Now in communion, the things that belong to the various parties (who are not parts) are shared. If I am in communion with you, then your things become my things, and conversely. Everyone knows this when it comes to close or intimate relations. If someone close to you is suffering the dementia that has overcome her father, you also go through it with her. You can't help but go through it; that's what it means, to be close. Our problem is, we think this is extraordinary or unusual. But it is actually the essence of the human experience. We aren't isolated individuals who occasionally get caught up in "the things of others"; rather, we are humans who are essentially caught up in the things of others and we occasionally forget that and act like isolated individuals.

Christians participate in the blood of Christ. When Jesus is mocked, we are. When he is lovingly received, we are. When he is nailed and abandoned, we are there with him. The blood that drips from his wrists is our blood.

May I emphasize something? Our communion is in the *blood* of Christ. We do not participate in an unreal Christ, a spiritual Christ, a Christ who has been removed from the things of this world. We participate in Christ who offers himself to us: *Take my body, share in my blood*: we participate, that is, in the Christ who, offering himself to the world in love, is broken and killed.

What I'm trying to say is that just as participation in Christ saves us from a false understanding of ourselves as isolated individuals, so it saves us from a false understanding that only perfect, painless, suffering-free human being is the real human. Note the images you see as you go home today. They will be of humans wrinkle-free, smoothly bodied in elegant proportions, clothed—or barely clothed. Our image [the crucifix], by contrast, is formed in agony.

People often wonder, when they think about the resurrection body that is an element of the Christian promise, what their body will be like. Will I be young or old? In the resurrection, will I have hair? Will I still be skinny (or otherwise)? Will my body sag? What about my memory? Will some people limp? What about cleft palates, and people who speak with sign language because they cannot hear, and all the other oddities and handicaps that come with the human condition? Will we all be "normal" when all are raised? Or will we find that what we thought of as "abnormal" has, through a loving transformation, acquired its own distinctive normality?

Whatever it will be, faith is certain that God will give us the resurrection bodies he wants us to have, and that they will be (whatever they are) just right. But there is a clue in Christian tradition that they will not be what we conceive of as ideal bodies. The clue is in the wrists and side of Jesus. In his resurrection body, Jesus tells Thomas to reach out and touch—what was it? *His wounds*. The resurrection body of Christ, his eternal body that neither decays nor passes away, *that body* has forever the marks of his passion. Where the nails were. Where the spear was. Where he bled.

Our participation is in that body, that blood. What happens to him happens to us, and what happens to us happens to him. And because of him, what happens to you happens to me, and what happens to the person next to you happens to you. O we would so like to forget this, so like to think that the glory of the human being is to be a beautiful, strong, great-souled individual, able to take on anything, strong enough in ourself to weather any storm. But reality is otherwise. We who participate in communion are bound forever to each other—bound forever, to be precise, in the one body that died and yet lives.