

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

6/19/11

A Sustaining Relationship

Matthew 28:20

There was a time when Presbyterians (like most other Christians) gave significant attention to fencing the communion table. This was a process of defining in very specific terms who was permitted to participate in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. One had to be a member in good standing of a Presbyterian congregation, but even that was not enough. Worshipers were also expected to undergo a rigorous examination of their spiritual lives and demonstrate to the Session that they were "worthy" to be admitted to the sacrament. In colonial times Presbyterian Sessions usually issued communion tokens to those who had been approved to receive communion. In case someone did not get it, the communion liturgy included a warning issued by the minister that only those who were "worthy" should present themselves for participation in the sacrament.

But over the last 100 years our theological emphasis has shifted. We now recognize that no one is ever truly worthy. We all depend on the generosity of God's forgiveness and grace. The "fencing" of the table has been replaced by an understanding of the sacrament as a sign of the hospitality of God. Jesus made room at his table for all sorts of people (Cynthia Campbell, *Presbyterian Outlook*, October 4, 2010, page 21). Communion represents the central truth about the church. It is not a country club for saints, but a hospital for sinners. The church is not about establishing who is worthy. It is about the relationships that make us whole.

This understanding of the church is at the heart of Jesus' last appearance before the disciples in the 28th chapter of the gospel of Matthew. This encounter took place on a mountain in Galilee. All eleven of the remaining disciples were there. But for some reason it seemed to create as many problems as it solved. Matthew tells us that as the disciples saw Jesus they worshiped him. But at the same time, some doubted. Indeed, worship and doubt may have been the mixed reaction of all the disciples.

The response of doubt by the disciples on this occasion was a very curious one. We can assume that all of them had already seen the resurrected Christ. They were not being confronted with something new and surprising. The evidence for the resurrection was well established for these disciples. Furthermore, it is clear that the doubt described here is not the same kind of doubt that Thomas had experienced earlier. Thomas doubted reports of Jesus' resurrection. When he saw Jesus and heard the Lord call him by name he believed. But on this occasion the disciples are looking directly at Jesus and still some of them are in doubt.

It may be that their doubt had to do with what Jesus was asking them to do. He tells them to "go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19)." This is not what they climbed the mountain to hear. The doubters had good reason for feeling skeptical about this assignment. They knew that they had no wealth and no political clout. They also knew that they lacked the basic skills to succeed in creating a world wide movement. They were not great orators. They were not experienced organizers of grass roots movements. They did not have expertise in the languages and cultures of other nations. They had every reason to conclude that Jesus was calling them to a task that they could not perform.

There was another reason that some of the disciples were skeptical about the commission that Jesus was issuing to them. They were painfully aware of the fact that when Jesus needed them most they had all run away in fear. None of them had the courage to stick with Jesus after his arrest in Jerusalem. There is no reason to believe that they will do any better with the far more difficult task that Jesus was now giving to them.

But what the doubters are overlooking is that Jesus' call has nothing to do with the competence or the worthiness of the disciples. It has everything to do with the web of relationships that Jesus has created and promises to sustain. It begins with Jesus' forgiveness of the disciples. Jesus' final encounter with the disciples is arranged earlier in the chapter when Jesus appears to the two Marys. He tells the women to send the disciples to Galilee where they will see him. In that pivotal conversation he does not refer to the disciples as the losers who ran away in fear. He calls them brothers, "go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, there they will see me (Matthew 28:10)." The disciples are no longer losers. They have been forgiven. Jesus has moved them into a new and more intimate relationship with him. They are now his brothers.

The work that Jesus calls them to do is to expand the web of relationships that Jesus has created. God is no longer interested in fencing the table. People of every race and every culture are now to have an honored place at the table. The same forgiveness that Jesus has so lavishly poured out on the disciples is now extended to the whole human family. This work is not about them. It is what God is doing through Jesus Christ to provide the relationships which make us whole. That is the message conveyed by the last words of Jesus to the disciples in Matthew's gospel, "And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20)."

During my recent visit to Heidelberg I went to the Palatine Museum. There I saw an unusual carved altarpiece that was created for a church in Windsheim, Germany in 1509. It is a depiction of Christ and the twelve apostles carved on linden wood by Tilman Riemenschneider. For three centuries the origin and meaning of the work had been a mystery. A fire destroyed the Windsheim church and the slightly damaged altarpiece was moved several times before it arrived in Heidelberg. No one knew where it was carved or who carved it. Several heavy layers of paint had been applied to the altarpiece over the centuries. The paint served to hide the purpose of the artist.

The restoration of the carving in the 1970's revealed that this was a great work of art. When the paint had been painstakingly removed and the wood brought back to life the skill of the carver could be seen. The highly differentiated carving technique of the artist depicted the apostles with great insight and subtlety. The detailed expressions on their faces and the beautifully rendered arrangement of their hands offers a powerful statement of who the apostles were.

This altarpiece does not depict a particular incident or event from Scripture. Instead it is a representation of the relationships which sustain the apostles. They are shown to be people in a dynamic relationship with Christ which also binds them to one another. The artist reveals in their faces that they know they are forgiven and understand they are intimately connected to the one who is with them always.