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THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION
2/7/2021 Epiph 5A
Isaiah 40: 21-31, Psalm 147

This week in our Testimony class, we pondered who God is, how we experience God, and then how we might answer someone who asks us, “Who is God to you?” We looked at some scriptures that tell attributes of God, and described all the ways we saw there. No surprise - God is really hard to describe in a few words, because there is so much to say! A favorite line from the videos we watched was, “God doesn’t ‘exist’ (i.e. like a created creature) - God IS!” Life itself, being itself, our all in all, awesome. God is always there. God not only made all that is, God loves all that is - and cares if & when we suffer. And not just cares, but acts for us. The words from Psalm 147 that we used as our Call to Worship lists some of things God is responsible for doing - caring for the brokenhearted, binding up the wounded, lifting up the downtrodden, naming all the stars, makes it rain and grass to grow, and gives the animals their food. Yet what God most loves is when we come in thanksgiving and awe. Our piano duet on the hymn Fairest Lord Jesus reminds us of the beauties all around us that are made by God and reveal God to us. The scripture lesson from Isaiah continues on this theme, saying we’re like grasshoppers before the extensiveness of God - doesn’t that remind you of Kwai Chang, in the classic tv show Kung Fu - Master Po used to say, “Ah, grasshopper...” to the young Kwai Chang.....God raises and lowers kings and princes. “To whom will you compare me,” asks God? “Who is my equal?” The implied answer - no one.

There’s a t-shirt a friend used to wear that had swirling galaxies like the Milky Way and more, and there was this little arrow in one arm of the Milky way where scientists think our own galaxy is, and maybe pointing to the little planet earth going around our medium-sized sun - the arrow says, “You are here.” Talk about feeling like a grasshopper! Maybe more like an ant!

The mysteriousness and boundlessness of who God is and what God is like can overwhelm us - and our finite, created brains cannot take it all in. We try and understand what we can, yet we are the creatures, not the creator. Our best scientists are still discovering the miracles of creation, in the direction of the micro as well as the macro.

Now I like to understand things - I like to figure them out. I know I can’t understand everything about everything, true. It’s hard enough in the natural world to understand

everything; it's even harder to understand all about people. But trying to understand about God is in a different league altogether. For the last decade in my life, God's mysteriousness and overwhelmingly unknowability made me feel so insignificant. And it's hard to feel warm and close to such a huge and mysterious and virtually unknowable God. Yes, in a way it puts things in perspective, in a galactic and universe way and multi-millions-of-years way.... But I also missed the way I used to feel loved and known and important to God...because, you know, both parts are true.

Because the truth is that this overwhelmingly mysterious and creating God is also the same God who knows each of us distinctly - God knows the number of hair on our heads, knows when one of our organs begins to fail, knows when a cell starts to multiply too fast and is just making a cancer; God knows what we long for and what is missing to make us whole - and God wants us to be whole. God cares when people are held back and discriminated against or oppressed; God cares when we suffer from pandemics, or totalitarian governments, or climate change; God knows when we grieve and when we rejoice. Jesus says God knows and cares if even the littlest bird falls to the ground.

One of the ways we celebrate and know God's intimate love and care for us is in our sacrament that we call the Lord's Supper, or Communion. The more liturgical churches call it the Eucharist, which is the Greek word for 'thanksgiving' - that long prayer we do before eating and drinking in communion is called the Prayer of Thanksgiving, the Eucharistic prayer, and it starts with creation, and moves through the prophets and on to that ultimate sacrifice of caring, God's incarnation in Jesus, and the way he obeyed even to his death - and was then vindicated by being raised in a new creation of life. Because death is never the last word for God - Life and creation & resurrection spring up in newness.

This sacrament has so many layers in it that I hardly know where to start to talk about it! But I have to start, so let's start with the elements of grain and grape, things of nature that surround us, and that are given us for food. Like I pointed out last week, when the grain is picked and then crushed, it ceases looking like it did when it was growing and living. Then it's further transformed by heat and cooking - and finally then it can be eaten by us, and its goodness can be taken into our bodies to nourish us. And although we can eat grapes off the vine, to make wine for our drinking they also are plucked from their living stems, crushed, then subjected to the transforming process of fermentation, and become our drink. The initial form dies; the form

we eat and drink has been transformed - so it can be a help to our bodily needs. In such, it is an illustration of the death of Christ followed by the resurrection to a wholly new kind of life, which is offered to us freely when we believe.

God is actually revealed in the works of creation itself, the works of God's hands. The apostle Paul argues early in his letter to the Roman believers, that people should be able to see what they need to see of God in creation, so we are without excuse for not believing. We see this same pattern of death followed by a transformation that feeds new life all over nature. Starting with the explosive deaths of the whole first generation of stars, which threw newly forged elements all over space - which eventually became our planets. Trees and plants die, and bacterias work on them and turn them into nutrients for the soil. I regularly turn dead leaves, used coffee grounds, carrot peelings, egg shells and more into a compost that enriches the soil and feeds the new life. Earth's precious few inches of topsoil are made from organic compounds from leaves, insects and other forms of life which have died and been crushed. The crude oil our culture depends on comes from similar materials - old oceanic creatures, algae, plankton - transformed under pressure and heat. Even after a forest fire, things come back, certain kinds of mushrooms thrive after a fire, too. Even the energy of sunlight, leaving the sun and traveling through space, becomes food for the plants here through photosynthesis, which use it to grow and produce the fruit and grain that then feed animals, including us humans. And animals are regularly killed and eaten, thankfully, for their sacrifice which makes our living possible, Native peoples world-wide use all the papers of the animal, and thank them for giving themselves. Self-giving, sacrifice, and death transformed into new life are modeled in all that God created.

If we accept that something of God the creator is revealed in all that God created, it's not too far off to see how Jesus could literally say that the bread and wine were God's very flesh and blood. In my point of view, it doesn't take a special prayer by a priest to turn these elements of earth into the body and blood of Christ - they already are, in themselves. When we eat of the fruit of the earth, we are taking in the very creation and expression of God - and every time we eat we take in the gifts of God. The holiness and sacredness of the small meal we partake in the ritual of communion here, reminds us that ALL we eat and ALL we have is from God in the first place - God providing for us and our welfare and nurture. ALL of creation is sacred; we live and move in the midst of the sacred provisions of our God, who loved us, who sacrificially became one of us, was rejected and killed by us, and yet still sought us through the resurrection of Christ.

That, my friends, is the most personal connection with our awesome God that I can think of. God surrounds us, God feeds us, God knows us, God calls us beloved. Eucharist, thanksgiving, gratitude, is our only possible response.

I had a conversation with someone about whether this table here is a table or an altar....Both images are certainly in our Scriptures. I grew up with the imagery of altars of the Old Testament, where, like the sacrifices of the past, Christ the perfect lamb was sacrificed for our sins. I've grown to like the imagery of a family table, though, as Jesus is shown over and over eating and drinking with saints and sinners, sharing meals with friends and family, talking of us believers as sisters and brothers. And Jesus told stories of heavenly feasts and banquets where many are invited in - especially as an image of heaven. Our prayers over communion often end with the words, "until we feast with him in glory." The imagery of the table is also deep in scriptures. So the bread and cup we share may just be small bites; however, they carry big meaning.

In my Sermon Prep questions, I asked you all to recall times when communion was especially meaningful, when the spirituality of the sacrament broke through the ritual actions we perform regularly. So here's one of mine. It happened at a clergy retreat in my first presbytery, as our presbytery executive led us in communion to close the retreat. The thing is, we all knew he was dying with liver cancer - and most probably was the next one of us there in the room that would be among the saints at rest. As he took that bread and cup and said the words about the unity of the whole body, the saints before us and the saints that come after us, and oneness with Christ and God, and the words about until we feast with him in glory, I felt everything shimmer - I felt the oneness, the presence of saints of the past, and my Dad and my younger sister and other people from the church where I grew up - I felt them all there hovering; I felt the connection between all of us believers tied up with each other and with our savior Jesus. I've never forgotten it. Moments like these are precious times, thin places, where the reality of earth and heaven are together. I hope we each have had such experiences of the holy in this our sacramental meal, as we worship God who is both eternal and mysterious, yet present here and now in love. AMEN.