

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 14

"I Will Not Leave You"

John's description of the Last Supper – Jesus' final Passover *Seder* before his Crucifixion - is full of poignancy. Jesus tells the Eleven – Judas has left already – that he is going to leave them. *"I will be with you only a little while longer... where I am going you cannot come... where I am going you cannot follow now, but you will follow later. I am going to prepare a place for you and will come back to take you with me. I am going to the Father. I will ask the Father to give you another Counselor to be with you forever.. I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you. The world will not see me, but you will see me. It is for your good that I am going away..."*

His friends must have been confused beyond words, anxious, uncomprehending. Going where? Coming back? Going to the Father? Another Counselor? What could he mean? It was clear as least that he was about to go somewhere, but he was also promising not to leave them alone. How could this be?

Over the next week, over the six weeks after that, some of these things surely began to fall into place. "Gone" to crucifixion, "come back" from the grave. Gone back to heaven, but promising to return. Finally at Pentecost the coming of "another Counselor." Over years that followed, a persistent sense that the risen and living Jesus was still with them.

But what about people who came to faith in Jesus after that? How could *they* know the presence of the risen Jesus? It took years to figure out and write down what they experienced in those early generations, but eventually it crystallized enough for

succeeding generations to agree that they too were able to encounter the living Jesus. How did, how do, people do that?

Many ways, but here are three that the 1st C. writers agreed on. You could and you can meet Jesus in the midst of *his people* – the church, the *"body of Christ of which he is the head."* The metaphor turns out to mean more than "we are now his hands and feet and eyes and ears in the world." Rather, it is within the community of people who have faith in Jesus that *he* becomes real. Not just that people are emulating him, or following his teachings, or serving as he commanded, but, as Jesus himself said, *"where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."*

We can never fully encounter Christ's presence without being an integral part of his people, his body. We meet him here in ways that a "lone Christian" can never do. People who have "personal faith" in Jesus, but never mix with his people, are missing far more than they know. People who live on the edge of the church, as many of us have done at times, have no idea what they are going without. Jesus is among us as we gather in his name.

He also taught something equally surprising: that when we serve the *needs of other people* as he did, it as though we served *him*. Not just that he counts it as "done for him," but in a very strange way, when we get on our knees to help other people, when we get our hands dirty, when we feed the hungry and visit the sick and the lonely and the prisoner, we meet

Jesus. We don't know how this happens, and some people mystify it – Mother Theresa famously said that she served “the Christ in the poor” – but there is clearly something that deepens our faith and our awareness of Jesus when we serve as he did and as he commands us to do.

Thirdly, Christians agree that in some special way we meet the risen Christ when we take part in *the Lord's Supper* together. While some Christian groups count the Supper as a simple memorial, “remembering what Jesus did,” the great majority have not hesitated to call Communion a Sacrament, or at least a “Means of Grace.” Without debating details of what happens to the bread and wine, most Protestants, as well as Catholic and Orthodox Christians, agree that Christ is really present when we celebrate the Communion.

So we not only remember Jesus' giving himself up to death “for us,” but in the process we become freshly aware of his risen presence. Our belief, our faith, our experience of him is deepened, and we “*feed on him by faith, in our hearts, with thanksgiving*” as the old Book of Common Prayer says. Those of us who call Communion a Sacrament declare by that word that this symbolic action conveys an inner spiritual reality; that we do encounter Christ here in a way that is unlike any other.

So the sharing of the bread and wine, simple as it is, part of everyday human life of eating and drinking, thanking God for the produce of our farms and fields and orchards and the people who work in them, sitting around a table together, is also an “other-worldly” event where we encounter God. The veil that hides his kingdom from view becomes for a moment almost transparent. In remembering our Lord, he becomes more real to us.

So the meal is both somber and celebratory. We grieve again over the sin of a fallen world, and our part in it, which drove Jesus to die. We recall with awe that the Son of God should suffer; that God should experience death. But we also find joy in

Jesus' risen presence, and his promise that this meal is a foretaste of the great Banquet to come, the “*wedding supper of the Lamb*.” We are not only all invited, we are *commanded* to attend, because communally we who are now the body of Christ will then be known as “*the bride of Christ*.” We *must* be there – “we are the bride”!

So we rejoice that our sins are forgiven, our pardon is assured, our future is secure. If we are his now by faith, we shall be gloriously his at the Great Banquet in the Kingdom of God. And this meal is only an appetizer.

Let us celebrate Jesus' presence among us as we gather in his name, as we serve others as though we were serving him, and as we meet him in “Holy Communion.” “*Do this in remembrance of me*,” he said, and we gladly obey, for he has kept his promise, and has not left us as orphans.

Let us pray...