

Sermonic Essay

On Becoming Like Jesus: A Theological Justification for the Passing of the Peace During Communion

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“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27)

On September 11, 2001, as I was on my way to work, I heard a report about how the world does business. When disagreements arise, we resort to violence. Whether it involves flying airplanes into buildings or launching smart bombs, the world believes that the most convincing way to air its grievances is through violence. To the extent that the world has always resorted to violence to achieve its ends, September 11 was different in degree – but not in kind.

Immediately, of course, the saber rattling began. One cannot let such gestures against one’s people go unpunished. Not to return violence against our enemies, it would appear, only begets more violence. Consequently, the United States launched retaliatory strikes under the righteous sounding and seemingly unassailable logic of the “war on terrorism.” A war on terrorism, it is widely believed, is a self-evidently good thing in which to engage. After all, if we cannot join forces against terrorism, then we put our safety and sovereignty at risk. The thinking goes something like, “If someone strikes you on one cheek, make certain that that one is physically, economically, and technologically incapable of striking you on the other.”

The trouble for the church in this particular way of thinking is not that we are taught to avoid having enemies, but that we have been taught by Jesus what kinds of enemies we ought to have and how we are to act toward them. We are taught to love those who hate us and to pray for those who persecute us (Mt 5:44). That is to say, the church bears witness to the truth that peace is not something human beings are capable of mustering up on their own – if only given enough time and enough good will (under the best case) or enough

firepower and tactical superiority (under the worst). Our mere presence in the world as followers of the crucified Christ testifies to the gift of peace that Christ gives to those who follow him.

Fortunately, however, the church has the rich resources of its practices to fall back on to embody the peace available in Christ. Because the peace that Christians claim is at the heart of faith is so counter-intuitive, the church has often found it helpful to include within the service of worship a practice capable of forming our lives together as a peaceful people. The passing of the peace is a traditional liturgical act that seeks to hold before the faithful the eschatological hope that the reign of God will be characterized by the peace established when God finally puts all things right. In practicing it in worship, the church projects for all to see the shape of its commitment to living out God's will that the world would finally be reconciled.

In the passing of the peace during worship, we reenact that moment between Jesus and his disciples as he prepares to go up against the violence of the powers and principalities with only grace and mercy to defend him. Jesus, in John's telling of it, after having washed his disciples feet at the last supper, and before going to the garden where he will be betrayed into the hands of his enemies, tells his disciples not to be afraid – that the peace they will find when he leaves them is a gift and not a moral accomplishment.

By standing during worship to share a sign of the peace of Christ, the church reminds itself that we are an eschatological people, that we are headed toward a future that we did not invent, nor one that we can ensure. By that one outrageous act every week, we make a statement to the world about our profound faith that this world belongs to God, and that if it is ever to be set right (which is to say, if it is ever to be truly a peaceable kingdom), it will not be by the preeminence of military sophistication or the cleverness of diplomatic maneuvering. Peace is not something we achieve; it is something Christ gives. Passing the peace reminds us that our first and truest allegiance is to the kingdom of God, which relies not at all on borders or bombs to secure peace.

The reason we do it as we approach communion is because it is as we approach the table of the Lord that we are most aware of our propensity for violence. After all, Jesus was killed in the name of securing peace. We understand that without our gathering for the Eucharist, we are just as prone to believe that it is possible to achieve

peace through violence – that if we only kill just a few more people (read: a few more of the *right* people), we will finally have killed killing. But the table of the Lord is an antidote to such naiveté. We remind ourselves through the feast set before us that true peace comes only through a God willing to absorb violence, rather than inflict it. We pass the gift of peace to one another on the way to the table because Christ passed the gift of peace to his disciples on the way to the death that made the table a possibility.

By engaging in an admittedly uncomfortable practice like passing the peace during communion, we begin to learn and to be shaped through the cruciform peace of Christ, which we cannot manufacture, nor impose through power. We offer to the world another way of living with one another that is faithful to the life and death of the Lord who claims us. An accommodated church, which often offers nothing more than a christianized restatement of things “everybody already believes anyway,” has an opportunity through this counter-cultural act to stand over against the world’s false substitutes for peace – bought with the blood of children.

Not only does the passing of the peace during communion allow us to be faithful in our witness about who ultimately controls the world, it helps us to strengthen that witness by living out the peace and forgiveness of Christ among his followers. The church is not the kingdom of God, but the kingdom is the vista toward which we journey. Therefore, Christians are still as capable of sin as the world; the difference is that Christians are required to be reconciled with one another. Followers of Jesus have been given the difficult responsibility of seeking and extending forgiveness. Loving those who would do us harm does not come naturally; it is a discipline that comes through practice – empowered by grace. In observing the passing of the peace during communion, we seek to observe this practice in the midst of our most important activity.

“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). The church attempts to remain faithful to its call to be a reconciled people through the *practice* of reconciliation.¹ Christians have an important opportunity to offer the world a different way of living together – one that relies not on violence and division, but on the reconciliation available to us who have been reconciled in the

death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Eugene Boring indicates that the prospect of reconciliation proposed here by Jesus is “even more important than worship at the altar.”²

The world relies on coercion when division and strife arise. Christians, in passing the peace, embody God’s understanding of how differences are to be resolved in the kingdom. The Eucharist reminds us of God’s action in Christ on our behalf; the passing of the peace in the midst of the Eucharist reminds us of our first responsibility to one another and to the world as a result of God’s action in Christ on our behalf. From this precise placement in the service of worship, the passing of the peace derives its true meaning and its truest potency to shape us as a Eucharistic people whose commitments are to seek to heal discord, precisely in the manner Christ healed discord – through confronting our division with forgiveness. Setting it in another part of worship serves only to distract us from its crucial implications for the people of God in a world at war, tempting us to view it as only another time to “meet and greet.” Placing the passing of the peace in the service of the table discourages the casualness of conversations about pot roasts and new haircuts. Passing the peace seeks to make us disciples equipped for the kingdom of God – not people who are warm and fuzzy. Our goal as disciples, after all, is to become more like Jesus, not to become nicer people.

Without question passing the peace makes people uncomfortable. We are a sinful people who, left to our own devices, would rather not own the conflict between us. Being honest about our inabilities to overcome, by our own power, that which divides us allows us to remember that the peace Christ gives is a gift. Placing the passing of the peace in the service of Holy Communion calls to our attention our sinfulness and our need for reconciliation – the very point of the table.

Clearly, the motion involved in passing the peace infringes on people’s “quiet time of meditation” – without, of course, doing away with it entirely. But that is the point we seek to make by observing this ancient practice: communion can never be only a vertical relationship between the believer and God; the implications of communion are also very much horizontal. That is to say, we commune during the Eucharist not only with God in Christ through our personal prayers, but with God through the *body* of Christ in recognizing our inter-connectedness as brothers and sisters in Christ.

“For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1John 4:20b).

Therefore, any attempt to reinforce the *private* at the expense of the *communal* leads us into theologically unsupportable territory. When Paul indicts the Corinthian church for improper communion practices, it is precisely because of their tendency to focus on themselves, and not one another, as Paul says is appropriate. Rich people were gathering for the Lord’s Supper and consuming all the food and drink without regard to those of lower social status, thus setting up divisions in the body.³ An unhealthy preoccupation with oneself at the expense of one’s attachment to the community is exactly what Paul identifies as the problem. Paul then issues a stern rebuke by saying: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (1 Cor. 11:27-29). The “body” that Paul asks the church to discern is not one’s own body, but the body of Christ. Paul, in this passage, leads us away from attempts to co-opt the Lord’s Supper for our own private nourishment (physical or spiritual), by exhorting us to focus on our relationship to God as a part of the wider body of Christ.⁴ Passing the peace during the communion, therefore, ritualizes the practice of helping us to look beyond ourselves to the body of Christ.

That passing the peace makes people uncomfortable is a theologically uninteresting question. The church has very little invested in making people comfortable, in meeting people’s “felt needs.” The church’s main task in making disciples fit for the kingdom of God is helping people to understand their *true* needs, to help them to want what God wants. To say, “Yes, that’s all well and good, but people are really, *really* uncomfortable passing the peace during communion” makes no appreciable difference to either the theology or ecclesiology of the argument. Simply adding more *reallys* is really beside the point.

If what the church is about is equipping disciples for the kingdom of God, then we need to be serious and thoughtful about the practices in which we engage. We need to make certain that what we do in worship makes us more like Christ, not more comfortable with ourselves. Only then can we be certain that what we get is what we need.

End Notes

¹Cf. *The Didache*: "And on each Lord's day of the Lord be gathered together and break bread and give thanks; after confessing your transgressions, that our sacrifice may be pure. And let none that has a difference with his fellow come together with you until they be reconciled, that our sacrifices be not defiled. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord, 'In every place and time offer me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great King, says the Lord, and my name wonderful among the gentiles'" (14:1-3). *Didache: The Unknown Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, ed. Brent S. Walters (San Jose, CA: Bibliographics Inc., 1991), 203-4.

²M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 8, *The New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 190.

³As Richard Hayes notes: "This is a powerful indictment of the high-status members of the community who are disregarding the symbolic implications of their behavior for the community as a whole," in *First Corinthians*, interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 197.

⁴Hays writes: "Unfortunately verses 27-28 have often been taken out of context and seriously misinterpreted: the statement about eating the bread and drinking the cup 'unworthily' has often been misunderstood to mean that only the perfectly righteous can partake of the Lord's Supper, and the call for self-examination has been heard as a call for introspection. This is, however, a grave misreading...Paul's call to self-scrutiny (v. 28) must therefore be understood not as an invitation for the Corinthians to probe the inner recesses of their consciences but as a straightforward call to consider how their actions at the supper are affecting brothers and sisters in the church, the body of Christ," *ibid.*, 200.



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