Sunday May 1, 1977

"WHAT HAPPENS AFTER COMMUNION?" John 21:9-17

Usually when we think of Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper, we visualize a formal worship service where bread and wine are shared by the participants with an accompanying liturgy. We remember that the first Communion service took place the night before the crucifixion of Jesus, when he met with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. At that meal he took bread and wine and gave it to them to signify his coming death and resurrection.

After the resurrection, however, the Bible indicates that some of the Communion services with Jesus present took place informally and were not planned. The first of these happened Easter Sunday evening when Jesus sat at table with two of his followers. As they were sharing the evening meal, Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them and it was at this point that they recognized who he was.

Another unplanned Communion service took place some days later in the morning. Seven of the disciples had been fishing since early morning. Just as day was breaking, they saw a man on the beach, but didn't recognize him. However when they came to the shore, they found a charcoal fire there with fish broiling on it and bread provided. When the disciples had gathered around the fire for breakfast, Jesus took the bread and the fish and gave it to them. It was an unplanned informal communion service, not with bread and wine, but with bread and fish.

When breakfast was finished, Jesus began to question Simon Peter. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" In other words, "Do you love me more than the fishing business and more than all other things in the world?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again, Jesus asked Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter again replied, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." A third time Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" Peter repeated his answer, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Peter must've been a bit exasperated by having to answer the same question three times. But not many days before,

Peter had denied even knowing Jesus three times. Perhaps this was a reminder to Peter that saying and doing are two different things.

For us, however, the important part of this whole episode following that early morning informal communion service is what Jesus told Simon Peter to do after breakfast and after his promise that he indeed loved Jesus. Jesus said, "Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep." In other words, Jesus was saying to Peter and he is saying to us--"You are not only guests at my table, but you are also to be a community of caring people; caring and being responsible for your own actions and caring for each other and for the larger community and creation as a whole."

Consider the implications! The emphasis in our world seems to be the other way around. Recently I listened to a radio program on which several people were discussing narcotics addiction. At one point the chairman of the group played a taped interview with an addict who made a passionate plea for the decriminalization of drugs. One line kept recurring in his argument: "It doesn't hurt anyone but the user himself!" In subsequent responses to this tape, it came to light that the young man whose views it expressed was at that time in Jail. He was accused of having assaulted and robbed an aged storekeeper in order to get money to support his habit and had been in prison twice before on similar charges. Yet he had the temerity to say of his addiction that "It doesn't hurt anyone but the user himself."

Few of us would defend that position on narcotics. But it seems to me that an increasing number of us are guilty of perpetrating in other ways the fallacy which stands out so glaringly in it. Too many people, including religious people are willing to support various kinds of debatable behavior on the ground that they hurt nobody but the one engaged in them.

What this contention overlooks is that no one can say with certainty of any action that its consequences are limited to those who set them in motion. In all but the most isolated instances what one human being does has at least subtle ramifications which hurt or help those around him or her in an unending series of concentric circles. To care for others means we are concerned all the time about what effect our actions have on others.

Chain smokers who exercise their right to destroy their own lungs poison the air we breathe and stand a fair chance of ending up respiratory patients in a hospital and having lung cancer. This increases hospital insurance premiums for the rest of us, not to mention the anguish they cause their family and friends.

Even such intimately personal decisions as abortion, have implications for the society as a whole. To say that my action is harmless to all but me because it does not leave blood on the rug or visible scars on someone's body is pure nonsense.

Now of course I realize that it's impossible to live even the most exemplary life without inflicting pain. The man or woman who earns a promotion at his or her job excludes others from the same preferment. The defense of western civilization against Nazi tyranny resulted in the deaths of millions of relatively innocent people. So even when we are as caring and loving as possible, we sometimes cause trouble or pain for others. On the other hand we cannot legitimate any act by the argument that it harms no one but the actor.

What happens after communion? We are to care for each other. And that caring means being careful about our actions and what they do to others. An honest admission that we live by the sacrifices of others will not eliminate all the suffering in life, but it may keep our trouble causing behavior to a minimum and help us direct our energies toward the best human advantage. That's what Communion and the Christian faith are all about.