

Doorways to the Divine

John 10:1-10

All Saints Sunday

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 3) 2019

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Who can come to the Lord's Table has been a question for centuries. This is especially true among baptists.

Most baptists have said that the order is first, you must be baptized and second, after baptism you may come to the Table. But not always. English Baptists going back to the 1600's disagreed about this for various reasons. Partly they disagreed over the definition of what was real baptism. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when infant baptism was a way the state enrolled the newly born on their tax and citizenship rolls, baptists resisted and said that baptism was about becoming disciples and entering into communion with Christ and Christ's followers, the church, so infant baptism was no baptism at all. Baptism was for believers, who respond to Christ's call to discipleship.

Other baptists disagreed. John Bunyan, the great English Baptist of the later 1600's, and pastor to the Baptist church in Bedford, referred to the same scripture we read this morning from John 10, "The Church of Christ hath no warrant to keep out of communion the Christian that is discovered to be a visible saint in the world..." (Bunyan, *Difference in judgment about water baptism being no bar to communion* [1673]). Bunyan emphasized that Christ is the gate of the sheepfold and that Christ's Table must be open to all Christians, regardless of when they

were baptized or if they had been baptized. It is in and through Christ that we enter into God's presence whether we've been baptized or not.

I have been thinking and reading about this for most of my forty years in ministry. It's not easy and there is no clear answer. I can make a good case for only those who have been baptized coming to the Table (Question: How do we know who has been baptized? There were some 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist churches that gave out "Communion tickets" ahead of time to only those who they knew and could verify that they had been baptized. You showed your ticket at the Table or else you were fenced out.) But I can also make a good case – and this is where I've come down – *this Table is for everyone who loves the Lord Jesus Christ and wishes to follow him whether they have experienced baptism or not.*

So these reminders: first, this is a holy place. As T.S. Eliot said, "You are here to kneel/Where prayer has been valid" (*Little Gidding*). Prayer, hearing the Word, singing hymns, baptism, and receiving the Lord's meal has been going on in this very place for nearly 50 years – and in the wider church for 2,000 years. This is a place where prayer has been valid. And it is still valid.

This summer when we were out in West Texas on a ranch along the Clear Fork of the Brazos River, we were in my brother's big pickup and came to a big, open pasture. We couldn't see the road due to the grass and brush growing. We did not know which way to go. We paused and looked for the old ruts and in a moment, sure enough we could make them out. By carefully following the old, timeworn ruts we were able to find our way.

Likewise, there are certain things we do in worship that are the timeworn, well-used paths to God. When we are not sure where to go, we're not sure of the way, we join in the old ways through which we find our way to God. Where prayers have been valid. We sing hymns not because we can sing but because this is one of the most important ways, one of the essential doorways to God and from God to us. We pray, we listen to the preaching of the Word, we come to this sacred Table and receive the nourishment of the Lord Jesus Christ. These are the places where prayer has been valid, those thin places between heaven and earth, between God and us. These are doorways to the Divine and from the Divine to us.

Remember the quote I recently used from St. Catherine of Siena, "All the way to heaven is heaven because Christ is the way." Christ is the doorway to the sheepfold and all of these timeworn paths are ways the faithful have learned the way.

Second reminder, we walk through the doorways to meet God and through this doorway God meets us. Here, we join in, participate in God and God's way. Whether we have been baptized or not, we are meeting God here and our lives will become different. This is no static act, but a dynamic participation in which we meet the Divine and we are changed. St. Augustine said that we ingest God at this Table and then God ingests us. We consume God and then God consumes us. This is not about "I want some grape juice and a piece of bread with everyone else." This is about God entering us and us entering God and never being the same afterwards. God consumes us.

An old friend of mine used to say, "God gets a holt of us and won't let go – all the way to the baptistry. I often quote the founder of Methodism, John Wesley,

who said that the Lord's Supper was open to all people whether they had been baptized or not. He said, that Holy Communion was a "converting ordinance" or "converting sacrament." If you were not yet a converted Christian who had been baptized, then eating at the Lord's Table will start the converting process in your life. God will consume you and you will find yourself being baptized along the way. It might start small but over time, God will consume us.

A third reminder is that we do not participate in Christ at this Table alone. Bonhoeffer said that in Holy Communion Christ stands between each member of the community, making connections between us, enabling us to communicate with one another (see *Life Together*). In other words, Christ is the host at this Table but Christ is also standing alongside you and your neighbor, breaking down barriers and making a way, a doorway.

British Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes who teaches at Oxford, says that not only is Christ standing among us and between us, the saints who have gone before us are here in Christ as well. We are not alone. Christ is here but also our ancestors in the faith like Baptist John Bunyan and Methodist John Wesley, St. Augustine and St. Catherine of Siena, Fannie Lou Hamer and Harriet Tubman, Will Campbell and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are standing with us. More than that, here among us – because we are with Christ – our loved ones from this church who have died, who are also in and with Christ, stand here with us (see Fiddes, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints*, p. 137).

Did you know that every pastor of Austin Heights will not pick up the covering of the Communion cups by the cross handle? We will not use the cross handle, instead, we grasp the lid around the edges. The reason is that Dr. Bob

Carroll taught every pastor, me included, that we do not use the cross as a mere handle. This is holy and the tableware is holy. Show respect.

So during this Holy Communion on this All Saints Sunday, I am aware to not grab the cross on the tableware. This is not simply a memory but is an awareness of presence. Christ is present. Dr. Bob is present. And while Christ might be forgiving of me if I use the cross as a handle, Dr. Bob might not be so.

Dr. Bob is here. So are Jack Decker and Archie McDonald. Ray Robertson, and Betsy Smith. And so many others who have gone before us, helping show us where prayer is valid, where singing is valid, where receiving the nourishment of Christ is valid. They help show us the doorways to God and they walk with us.

Through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

Invitation to the Table:

All who love our Lord Jesus Christ and desire to be his true disciples are invited to this Table.

Come to this table, not because you must but because you may.

Come, not because you are strong, but because you are weak.

Come, not because any goodness of your own gives you a right to come, but because you need mercy and help.

Come, because you love the Lord a little, and would like to love him more.

Come, because he loved you and gave himself for you.

Come for Christ himself wishes to meet you here.

Come and meet the risen Christ, for we are his Body.

(from Christopher Ellis and Myra Blyth, eds., *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples*, pp. 14, 22).