

Exodus 16:1-12
John 6:30-35

“Breaking Bread for a Broken World”

R.P.C.

Communion

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Berlin was a city of complete destruction and devastation following the end of World War II. Daily bombing raids by the Allied Forces left the city in utter ruins. The survivors began the long, tedious struggle of digging out of the rubble. Slowly, meticulously, the ruins were removed and the arduous task of rebuilding, brick upon brick, timber upon timber, stone upon stone began.

But almost as if adding insult to all the injury, it wasn't long before Berlin became a divided city. Almost overnight a great wall was erected, separating the east side from the west. The wall quite literally divided friends and families - entire neighborhoods. It stood there day after day as a visible reminder of conflicting ideologies: Communism from the USSR vs. democracy from the West, principally the United States. The wall stood there firmly as a stark reminder of a cold, cold war of words – as the symbol of division of East from the West – the symbol evoking FEAR – fear of each other and fear of the threat of nuclear annihilation!

There in the center of Berlin, there also stood a lonely reminder of the devastation caused by fear and the conflict of war only recently past. Standing out like a sore thumb, was the shell of what once had been a graceful church cathedral. The walls of those particular ruins were left there on purpose by a vote of the city council: They were to serve as a stark reminder as to what had happened during the 1940's as the whole world was engaged in war; they were intended to remain as a reminder and a symbol of the destructive nature of human beings. Those church ruins stood there, and in fact stand there still, as a caution – as a warning if you will, that such conflict and mass destruction always has the potential of happening again in our divided world.

A further look at those same ruins reveals that that once glorious cathedral displayed another symbol – a solitary statue – a statue that at one time was in the center of the garden and courtyard of that cathedral. The statue also bore the marks of the ravages of war: One hand was entirely missing. The figure was chipped and cracked and scorched in so many places that it was barely recognizable. But on closer inspection of the figure, it is a statue of Christ – His head is tilted slightly heavenward, his arms outstretched – one hand missing – but still arms outstretched to the world.

To leave a ruined statue of our Lord in that manner might disturb us at first “What a sacrilege it is to leave this broken statue of Christ here,” we might protest. “Couldn’t we replace this one with a fresh newly-carved marble one - c. one that is more easily recognizable; one without the chips and the cracks and scorch marks and a missing hand?”

But the eyes of that statue seem to be communicating a message: They seem to be surveying the ruins around, with a look of profound sadness. Those eyes seem to speak, as if they are saying, *“It is for this....exactly this ... that I had to come to earth – to bear on my own body the marks and signs of a broken world and a broken humanity.”*

That statue, left amid the ruins of that cathedral, stands as the visible reality of the words our Lord left centuries ago for our hearing: “This is my body broken for you...” These are not merely words to be used for a religious ritual. They are not merely words that were spoken thousands of years ago in an upper room to a group of obtuse and bewildered disciples. They are words that speak to us eternally of an eternally broken body for a constantly fragile and breaking world.

The Christ of our faith is not some serene, highly polished and aesthetically pleasing Christ. Our Lord does not simply stand there unperturbed – detached and uncaring, removed from the rut and ruin of this world. Ours is the Christ who willingly offered and gave himself to be broken and scarred in an act of sacrificial healing, for the reconciliation of our broken world.

There can be little doubt that we still live in a broken world. The evidence abides even within us. We each know and experience that brokenness within: We are often disappointed with the way we treat others. We are beset with our anxieties, divided in our loyalties, confused with which direction we are to take in life. We are disappointed in ourselves for those times when we did not speak up at some injustice, when we know God would want us to. We get frustrated at our lack of courage, our complicity with the status quo. We face our brokenness every time we come before God to identify and acknowledge our sins in heart-felt confession.

Our bodies bear the marks and convey our brokenness: Disease constantly attacks us, from the common head-cold to the ravages of cancerous cells. Aging takes its toll as we become less limber and develop the brokenness of nagging aches and pains.

Our brokenness is also reflected in our mental health, for it is said that one in three adults is confronted with at least some form of mental or emotional difficulty. The stress of modern living makes it more difficult to cope with our

daily tasks and responsibilities. In spite of labor-saving devices and the wonders of technology, why does it seem like life is getting progressively complex? We are constantly facing the brokenness of drug and alcohol abuse – whose habits may have been developed as a way of escape rather than confront our demons. Are such destructive habits as these not signs and symbols of the continued brokenness of the human spirit?

The world's brokenness is certainly experienced at a global level – race to race, nation to nation. Two decades after the end of World War II the Cold War seemed to reach its peak and a constant “pall of fear” hung over the world. I remember some years ago of reading that the students of Brown University voted on whether or not they wanted to stockpile cyanide tablets in the campus health center in case of nuclear war. They were determining if suicide would be better than being vaporized by a nuclear strike. You might recall those years when one of the songs of the age lamented, “we’ll all be nice and crispy, but we’ll still be number one!” Have we forgotten already how many times during those cold war years our brokenness nearly put us on the brink of the unthinkable?

Some years later the Secretary General of the United Nations shared his fears that international anarchy and chaos will continue to reveal our brokenness through the ever-increasing threat of terrorism. And though we are not currently engaged in a declared war with a nation, the threat that comes to us through ‘the war on terror’ continues.

Today we are facing instability in the Ukraine as Russia amasses troops on the border as an act of potential aggression. Conflicts abound in Africa as governments change as rapidly as the names change of the countries – places that are difficult to even find on a world map. The division in the mid-East flourishes where it appears there will never be a lasting peace or solution to the Israeli – Palestinian conflict.

We live in a broken world where far more is being spent on armaments than on programs of health and education. Every day we hear reports on new acts of terrorism –so much so that such reports are too easily taken for granted, and the horror of it all falls on calloused if not deaf ears. Walls and fences built by diverse ideologies continue to divide people from people, nation from nation. The result is that fear and mistrust continue to run unchecked throughout the world. Just look at the brokenness and division in our nations’ current partisan politics – And we are left wondering, is such division really getting us anywhere?

So where is this broken world heading? Where is the hope? Would it be too much to suggest that our hope – that the hope of the whole world lies right here

at this table? That hope lies right here with this bread that is broken? Could it be that the “breaking of this bread” is the means – the only means for the healing of this broken world? Could it be that the brokenness we experience at so many levels is beyond our healing, but can only be healed by the action of a loving, caring and involved God?

O, we can rationalize or try to hide the brokenness, or even try to fanaticize it all away. But here around this table, we come face-to-face with our Lord and are brought to confront the brokenness caused by our sin. Yes, it is because of us – because of our willful pride – because of our greed – because of our refusal to love and be loved – it was because of all of these factors and so many more that our Lord gave himself to be broken. Gazing upon this broken body there can be no denying that our brokenness put him on that cross. For as the hymn declares: “Mine, mine was the transgression, But Thine the deadly pain...”

Yet, while there is no denying the brokenness present in this sacrament, neither can there be no denying that in God’s mysterious, paradoxical way, it is here that we also find healing. At this table we are being invited to be reconciled to Christ – at his invitation. We are also being invited to be reconciled to others as we all gather - and we are being invited to be reconciled to ourselves! What this table demonstrates is that amid all the ruins of this broken world and our broken lives, God accepts us and is willing to go to these extraordinary means to prove our worth to God.

This table declares that we can do the very worst to God – we can even break his son’s body and nail him to the cross, and God is going to love us still. It is this love – this love that has no limits that provides the healing that we all so desperately seek. And you know, everything else becomes insignificant when we come to terms and realize that God loves us so much that his Son stretched out his arms for us on that cross, and die.

When we come to the Lord’s Table, we don’t come alone. Nor do we get to choose our company. We come to this table together with one another, and with all other faithful people of varied colors, nations and ideologies. The deep sea of God’s love and mercy washes the shores of every part of this world. Thus God’s grace cleanses and reconciles and heals – it purifies, and unifies and restores. Here is bread offered not just for me and mine, nor for people just like me – but for all people, so that unity in spirit may abound.

Andrew Wolfe, a North American pastor, wrote of a trip he made to Russia, shortly after the break-up of the former Soviet Union. While in Moscow he attended a Sunday morning worship service at a downtown church. The sanctuary

was filled to capacity, and a public address system broadcasted the service to a group who had gathered to listen out on the street. People were standing, pressed close to each other in the isles, the stairways and the courtyard.

Rev. Wolfe admitted he could not understand what was being said because he could not speak Russian, but by observing the expression on the faces, he knew the Gospel was being well received. He did understand however what was going on when the bread was being brought into the church along with large chalices of wine. Thus he prepared to celebrate the Lord's Supper with all those people he did not know, and he could not understand. Yet, despite their differences, he was accepted because of the One Lord they had all come to worship.

Bread was held up and blessed and passed around the congregation. When it was time for him to receive the bread, he later wrote about that experience: "We stood, but because of the crowd, somehow the bread was passed by me without my getting any, so I simply waited for the chalice not knowing what I would dip into it. But as I stood there, there came a tap on my shoulder, and I turned to see the face of an ancient Russian woman – a babushka. Her head was tied in a kerchief; wrinkles covered every inch of her face, but her eyes sparkled..."

"Then she did something that I shall remember as long as I live... She tore off half of her bread ... and gave it to me. She wanted to make sure that I shared fully in the banquet of Christ."

A breaking of the bread in a broken world.... It's a revolutionary act we perform each time we come before this table. For here as we gather together there is unity and peace. Here the brokenness is healed. Here we are given a taste – just a taste of God's kingdom here on earth, as it already is in heaven. Amen.