

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When we come to the altar, to receive the sign of God that is present in the sacrificial act of Christ which we commemorate through our celebration of the eucharist, we come seeking something. We come hungry for something. We come desiring a moment, an interaction, a connection to the holy that we cannot find in any other way in this world. This is a powerful experience as we come face-to-face with God in the bread and the wine. There exists within this intimate and powerful moment a chance to connect to something that is greater than us, while doing something that is so familiar and instinctive as eating and drinking. And as such, this act should be honored for the opportunity that it provides for us. It should be honored for if we begin to treat it as simply another part of the service, we lose our chance to connect with God in such an intimate and personal way.

We hear from Matthew today, quoting Jesus as stating: "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." This is our instruction we must consider as we come to the altar to receive the holy communion. This is the instruction that is codified in our own prayer book. For those who are so interested, you can flip to page 409, where under the Additional Directions for Holy Eucharist you will find the Disciplinary Rubrics. The first two rubrics make a lot of sense for protecting a community. The third, however, is the hard one. It reads: "When the priest sees that there is hatred between members of the congregation, *he* shall speak privately to them, telling them that they may not receive Communion until they have forgiven each other. And if the person or persons on one side

truly forgive the others and desire and promise to make up for their faults, but those on the other side refuse to forgive, the priest shall allow those who are penitent to come to Communion, but not those who are stubborn.”

This is a demanding understanding of the act that happens when we come to the table. It asks the question, if you come before God at the altar with anger in your heart can you actually receive God? And, it answers no, you cannot, and here we have Jesus providing us with this standard. This standard is an important and challenging level which we are expected to rise and meet. This is such a hard standard that most priests rarely invoke it as written. There are often pastoral reasons for doing so, but it is also pastoral to hold each and every one of us accountable to the expectation that is codified here in our prayer book, taking its authority from the lips of Christ.

I find this level of penitence, forgiveness seeking, of honesty, empowering in a lot of ways. Here we have an understanding of the eucharist, an understanding that values what happens at the table at such a high level, that it solidifies its importance and the importance for us to come to this table with our hearts unburdened from the anger and pain of our human existence. God can read what is on our hearts, and it is only when we are honest with ourselves about what is written on our hearts, can we begin to connect with God. God’s grace is a gift that is always present for us, but it requires of us an honesty about ourselves, about our understanding of how we impact others through our actions as much as we understand how others impact us. Grace exists for us when we turn to God, but it does not embrace us if we simply show up with no intention to acknowledge our need for it.

And, it does not require that we are successful, at least not in the traditional sense.

Rather, it requires that we make the effort to forgive, to seek forgiveness from both God and those whom we wrong, and a personal commitment that we will work to correct our faults that have caused this anger to exist between us. This opportunity is because of God's grace. Our confession, our seeking of forgiveness, our commitment to penitence, requires more of us than we typically give. Our confession, our seeking of forgiveness, requires us to look past the self and acknowledge the reality of the other. Our confession requires us to accept the fact that we have created a broken relationship, a broken system. Our confession requires us to accept the fact that we have created and caused harm upon another. Regardless of intention, regardless of the visible outcome, when we harm another we create a harm that must be acknowledged, so that the other may know that we see the harm we have created, so that the other may know that we know we have done wrong. Our confession then asks us to step out of the world that envelops us and accept the reality that our connections to one another must rely on a deeper understanding in our hearts, and without that connection to one another, we cannot begin to seek that same connection to God.

And, what of those unforgivable hurts, what of those things we do or are done to us that are impossible to forgive? Is there no hope then, when hope is needed most?

We are not asked to forgive everything that happens to us. We are not asked to forgive those who do things that are impossible to forgive. We are asked to seek reconciliation with ourselves. We are tasked with forgiving ourselves for the hurt we continue to inflict upon ourselves, for the blame we put on ourselves for being in such a

situation. For when evil is done upon us, it is not our fault. When evil is done upon us, the reality of God's grace is in the moment where we are picked up and the healing begins. Where we begin to stumble is when we don't even let that happen, when we refuse to heal our own selves, choosing instead to wallow in the pain and anger of the situation. God does not ask us to face the evil again in order to experience God. But, if we foster a deep-seated anger in our heart for that evil, then we have not accepted the offer to begin the healing process. We do not ever have to face that evil, speak to that evil, be in the same room as that evil, but we cannot go through our lives consumed with anger over the injustice that was perpetrated by that evil against us. Rather, we have to seek wholeness once more through asking God to fill us, as we empty our hearts of the anger that consumes us, the anger that prevents us from experiencing God's grace.

And, we seek this wholeness in the most perfect way when we participate in the eucharist that is laid before us each week. It may feel like a lot to ask, it may feel unfair for us to have to be a part of our own healing when evil is done to us, but ultimately, we can only experience healing if we are an active part of that healing. We can only experience healing when we are ready to open our hearts once more to the world and to God. We can only experience healing when we make that decision to empty ourselves of our anger at ourselves, when we make that decision to begin to empty ourselves of our anger at the evil done to us, for it is in our emptying that we can be filled again with the love and grace that God offers to us. Love and grace which are offered to us whenever and wherever we seek, love and grace that God offers to us here at the table.

So, when you approach the altar today, look at what is in your heart. Acknowledge if there is anger in your heart. Acknowledge if there is work you must do in order to reconcile with your brother or sister. Acknowledge the reality that is the tendency of our world to encourage our hearts to fill with anger, greed, lust, and work to empty yourself of these emotions, of these tendencies, so that you begin to create a space into which you can accept the healing presence of God that is present here for us each and every week in the eucharist. The healing presence of God that fills our hearts with courage, compassion, understanding. The healing presence of God that strips away the world and fills us with the holy. Be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and receive your gift.

Amen.