

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Thursday, March 20, 2008
Maundy Thursday**

IN REMEMBRANCE OF HIM

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

For three years after his conversion, the man who would one day be the most important of the apostles of Christ said and did nothing in public. Instead of hitting the road to tell everyone about his amazing experience on the Damascus Road, Saul of Tarsus retreated to the desert, and there absorbed from the disciples all he could about the life, teaching, death and resurrection of the Messiah whom he had met on that road, Jesus of Nazareth. Later, when his mission to the Gentiles bore much fruit, he in turn passed on to them what he had received from the Lord, and from the Lord's apostles.

One of the more important teachings he passed on had to do with worship, and especially with the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacrament of communion with Christ. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul related the events of the Last Supper, and Christ's command for its observance among His disciples. On that night, St. Paul wrote, Jesus "took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way," Paul goes on, "after supper He took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" By doing so, Paul tells them, you proclaim the Lord's death until the time when He returns to the world in glory. Remembrance, and proclamation – that is what we do here this evening.

First, there's remembrance. To understand what Paul means by this, we need to go back behind the obvious meanings to be found in our English translations of his letter. Twice in this passage he uses a Greek word which is rather inadequately translated in English, "remembrance." What we mean by remembrance is a recalling to mind of thoughts or events or people or things which are past. For instance, we might remember a vacation we took, or our high school graduation, or the time we won a golf tournament (or in my case a chess tournament!), or an enjoyable day spent with a close friend. In each instance, what we'd be doing is thinking back on the past, on times which will not be repeated, but that we cherish as part of our personal history. That is not what St. Paul is telling us to do this night.

The key to understanding what Paul is telling us to do tonight is found in the Greek word *anamnesis*. That's the word St. Paul uses to describe what happens at the celebration of Holy Communion. *Anamnesis* doesn't describe a subjective act of memory, something which exists only in our own heads. Rather, according to the Westminster Dictionary of Worship, "it is an objective act, in and by which the person or event commemorated is actually made present, is brought into the realm of the here and now." It is taking what is past and making it a present reality. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we aren't looking back to something which took place only in the distant past. We are joyfully

proclaiming that something is taking place right here, and right now, in the midst of this congregation, just as surely as it took place in Jerusalem 20 centuries ago.

Jesus did not just die 2,000 years ago. His death continues today, inasmuch as He continues to secure forgiveness for sinners by the power of His shed blood. His resurrection was not only for the first Easter morning; it's for this coming Sunday, and for tonight as well, inasmuch as the people of God are still being given the gift of eternal life by the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. And because He who was dead is alive forevermore, He continues to be present with us in this celebration of Communion, not just in our memories, but just as truly as He was present to the disciples at the last supper. John Calvin affirmed this in his own inimitable way in the Institutes of the Christian Religion when he wrote, "Why should the Lord put in your hand the symbol of His body, except to assure you of a true participation in it? But if it is true that a visible sign is given us to seal the gift of a thing invisible, when we have received the symbol of the body, let us no less surely trust that the body itself is also given to us...I conclude, that Christ's body is really, (as the common expression is,) that is, truly given to us in the Supper, to be wholesome food for our souls." (Institutes 4.17.10, 32.)

This is a simple idea, but it's difficult for those who think in English to really get it, so let me try to make it clearer. I want you to think about the best food you've ever eaten, or the best smell you've ever smelled, or the most beautiful music you've ever heard. Close your eyes and recall that taste or smell or sound. Really concentrate on it. Whether you're remembering a chocolate dessert or a broiled lobster, an especially pungent rose or a favorite perfume, a Bach concerto or a country tune, focus on it so intently that it becomes real again, if only just for a moment. You can really taste that chocolate, smell that fragrance, hear the perfection of that tune. Now let it go. We've all done that, haven't we? Remembered something so strongly that it seems like it's really happening again. Well, that's what *anamnesis* is like, except that in a sense impossible to define, what we bring to mind is real, as real in the moment we remember it as it was when it first happened.

Here's another example that brings it even closer to home. The night that Jesus gathered with His followers in the upper room was no ordinary night. It was the night of the Jewish Passover, a night of *anamnesis* upon which this one is based. Jesus and His disciples were observing the holy day through a ritual that is much the same now as it was then. The Passover is a way of looking back and becoming part of the saving events of Israel's history. That becomes explicit at the point in the evening when it comes time to tell the story of the Exodus one more time. At that point, the youngest child or adult present at the dinner table will ask the head of the household, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Notice that the question is not, "Why was that night different from all other nights?", meaning the night of the exodus from Egypt. It's not a question of looking back at what happened then and saying, "Wasn't what God did back then for our ancestors wonderful?"

It's a matter of looking at what God is doing now and praising Him for what He is doing to bring us out of our personal Egypts. In the most recent revisions of the Passover

service, this comes out even more clearly, as Jews throughout the world speak of what God did to preserve the nation through the Holocaust, to reestablish the Jewish homeland in Israel, and of what He is doing even now to free Jews from oppression wherever they may encounter it. God acted back then, and He is acting now. That is what Jesus celebrated that Passover night with His disciples. It is what we come together to celebrate tonight.

For tonight, we do not gather to celebrate the good deeds of a dead hero. The cup we drink is not a toast to the memory of a martyr. We come, not to my table or your table, or even to the church's table, but to the table of the risen Lord. It is His invitation to which we respond, it is for His generosity and His love and His sacrifice that we give thanks, it is for the work that He is presently doing in our lives that we offer our gratitude, it is for the mission in the world which He is even now carrying out through us that we ask for His Spirit's power. He bids us come to His table, remembering and thereby making real right now His death on the Cross and His death for us, His resurrection from the grave and the new life which we live in Him. Amen.