

Livin' Forgiven.

A sermon by Angie Witmer based on Colossian 3:12-17.
Sunday, November 25, 2007. Plymouth UCC.

So, it is the middle of “Hallow-Thanks-Mas”—that non-stop commercial advertising blitz that runs from the first of October until the end of the year—and find ourselves with the gift of a breather—a week here where nothing out of the ordinary is going on.

Thanksgiving is over—the costumes and muskets and the hour glass have been put away for another year. The official stewardship campaign has come to an end—but if you haven't yet pledged to the 2008 campaign, you really do need to get that done as soon as possible! Plymouth's 150th anniversary celebration is still a week off—I'm sure there will be plenty of last minute rushing around to do to get that party started. And Advent starts next weekend, too—which means that Christmas isn't far off, either, and that means special services, get-togethers, concerts, parties...soon life may feel a little crazy and maybe even a bit out of control. But today, right now, right here, we get to stop. Breathe. Rest. Talk about why it is we do what we do in here. We can even talk a little bit about why we do what we do out there. And maybe—just maybe—we can even find some ways to make the “in here” line up more with the “out there” so that our lives might feel a little more peace-filled and harmonious.

Let's start here: at the table. Communion. The feast. The meal. The last supper. Whatever you want to call it, we will be remember in just a few minutes that this is where Jesus spelled it out for his disciples and friends when he sat them down and said: “I'm not going to be around much longer, so you need to start thinking about doing the preaching, teaching, and healing without me.” Have you ever considered how scary that must have been for all of those folks seated at that table? They were there to celebrate Passover, after all. They weren't there to talk all serious business and stuff like that. But there it was: they had a job to do. Without Jesus. Not cool.

It didn't end there, though. Jesus knew they might need a little encouragement, so he continued: “You can do this. You've been doing it. I've taught you everything I know—you'll be great. And you won't be alone—God's Spirit will be with you. I promise. All

you have to do is remember what this is all about: Love. It's that simple. Love God. Love each other. Love God. Love each other. Love God. Love each other. If, for some strange reason, you forget, here's a reminder: every time you eat bread, think of me. This is my body, broken for you. And every time you drink, remember what I'm all about here: love. This is the cup of the new covenant that I have given you...and that covenant is...anybody? Yes. Love. Love. Love. Eat. Drink. Remember."

OK, I admit that is a pretty loose paraphrase but it does pretty much sum up what Jesus was talking about. Love. The message hasn't changed a lot over the years since then, either. We, as Jesus' disciples and followers, are called to do the exact same things: teach, preach, heal. Love. Love God. Love one another. Eat. Drink. Remember.

It sounds so simple...

Just out of curiosity—how many of you know exactly what happens when we share this meal together? And I do mean “exactly what happens”—to our bodies, our minds, our souls, one another and the whole community.

I've been wanting to ask that question for 35 years or more—as a little girl, I would sit in the pew as communion was served and watch the plates of bread and trays of grape juice pass by because I hadn't been through confirmation yet. And everyone knows that you have to go through confirmation in order to understand exactly what happens to a person when they take communion, right?

Well, not really. Let me say right now that if I had to wait until I understood exactly what happens when we share this meal together, I'd still be waiting. I don't know exactly what happens. All I know is that something does, indeed, happen. We are changed.

Transformed. I don't know exactly how it happens, but I have my ideas. I'll tell you more about those in a minute. For now, I'll share how the “wait until you get it” idea backfired:

In 8th grade, I was finally able to go through confirmation. It was pretty cool to have the opportunity to discuss on a more adult level things like who God is and who Jesus was and what my role is in this whole Christian ‘thing’. The “take home” message that I got from that experience was that Jesus did some pretty amazing things but he still depended on other people to get engaged and involved so that even more amazing things could happen. That’s where I was supposed to come in: when I became a confirmed member of the church, I would officially be Jesus’ partner in ministry, working to teach and listen and care for and love all kinds of people—even people I didn’t really consider to be overly “loveable”. I knew that in order to pull this off, a serious change would need to take place. I was having trouble loving my own family—how in the world would I love someone “unloveable”? I felt a little scared and a lot overwhelmed. Was I up to it? Could I really do it? Would I let God down?

And then it hit me—communion. I wasn’t able to take communion until now because I didn’t understand all of the heavy lifting that was required in order to be a Christian. I needed to be superhuman. In my mind, when I was confirmed I would become God’s partner in fighting the injustices of the world...and that could only happen after I took communion because it would be the magic combination of the bread and cup working their mojo in me that would make me into what God really wanted: a superhero. All of a sudden, I couldn’t wait to become a “real Christian”, fighting homelessness, hunger, and tyranny wherever they were to be found.

So after a mere six weeks of confirmation classes, I was ready for it: my first communion. I was a little nervous but mostly excited as the silver plate of cubed, white Wonder bread was passed. When it found it’s way into my hands, I solemnly selected which piece was meant for me, carefully picked it up off of the plate and put it in my mouth. I chewed once, maybe twice, before that gooey, soft, ball of bread got stuck to the roof of my mouth. That wasn’t cool. I thought about sticking my finger in my mouth and scraping it off but instantly dismissed that idea, knowing that my parents would be mortified. So I waited for the tray of grape juice cups to come. My mind wandered as I waited: does this happen to everybody? Or just to those who are new at the whole

communion scene? Maybe you're not supposed to chew? Or maybe—and this is the one I finally landed on—maybe the bread is supposed to stay in your mouth and wait for the juice! After all, the magic doesn't just come from the bread or the juice—it has to come from the two mixed together. If the bread hit my stomach first, it might start to digest before the juice gets there...and what if the really important magic part gets digested first?...yup, that was it. The bread was supposed to get lodged in my mouth.

Of course, that little cup of juice was barely enough to wet the bread down. I'll cut out the gory details of what all happened next, but suffice it to say that I was more than a little disappointed. I was embarrassed. And really pretty sad. I didn't feel any different. Actually, I felt a little silly. There hadn't been any magic transformation. I wasn't a super hero. I was just me—the same old me that had walked into the sanctuary 60 minutes earlier. Big deal. My bubble was burst. My hopes and dreams of tackling the world with God were put away. I guess I grew up.

Too bad. If there's one thing I've learned in the many years since that first communion, it's that God really doesn't need another grown up with all of the answers running around in the world. As a matter of fact, I now believe just the opposite to be true: God needs more child-like wonder turned loose in the world: people who are willing to say that they don't have all of the answers, people who are open to amazing transformation through things as ordinary as white bread and grape juice, people who don't need to be in control of the outcome but who are willing to go along for the ride and trust that God knows what is best.

I've learned that God doesn't want superheroes, either. We are enough. Together, we are enough. I've also learned that we need to work together—which is why Paul says in his letter to the Colossians that we need to forgive one another. He must really mean it because he mentions it twice in this particular passage. He even says that we need to put up with each other.

I've also learned that putting up with each other isn't easy but is so important because forgiveness and tolerance are at the heart of what it means to love one another.

Love. Love. Love. Jesus and Paul and The Beatles all got it right when they declared that love is all we need. It sounds so simple. I wish it were.

When we eat this bread, when we drink this cup, we remember who we are and to whom we belong. We remember what we are here for. But if we only do it here in this place, we forget. So here's what I suggest: practice love and tolerance and patience and forgiveness every day. Every time you eat, every time you drink, remember. Say you're sorry each and every day to those who need to hear it. And forgive those who say it to you...even if they don't say it out loud. It is in forgiving one another, day in and day out, that we are transformed. Changed. Made into the people God created us to be—not superheroes, but whole people full of love and compassion and peace.

Livin' Forgiven. Nothing out of the ordinary, day in and day out. That's what this is all about. May it be so. May it be so.