

BRING A CHICKEN TO THE COMMUNION TABLE

“Bring a chicken to the communion table.”

Is that a bizarre idea, or what?

But I didn't just dream up that strange idea in a lame attempt to be clever

That was the actual practice of a Christian Church in Italy in the 4th century.

Hopefully, sometime within the next 20 minutes or so, you will understand the reason for that unusual ancient practice.

My starting point in trying to make sense of that ancient practice is found in our text for this morning: James 2:14-18

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “go in peace: keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and **I by my works will show you my faith**

A number of Christians have difficulties with the book of James. The reformer Martin Luther is reported to have called the book of James an “epistle of straw.” The pastor in the pietistic Lutheran Church in which I was raised in Brooklyn, New York agreed with Luther. I can't recall him ever preaching a sermon based on the book of James.

The perceived problem with the book of James is that it teaches “works righteousness.” You can get to heaven by just doing good works; which seems to diminish the centrality of faith.

That perception reflects a mis-reading of James. Our text this morning teaches that faith and good works are two sides of the same coin; they are “inseparable.” This is brought home most clearly in the final words in our text: “**I by my works will show you my faith.**”

It isn't that our works give us a pathway into heaven. Rather, our good works are a deep expression of gratitude for God's love and grace toward us, which we have embraced through faith.

And if all our talk about having faith does not find expression in good works, then our talk is just a lot of nonsense.

This teaching from James fits perfectly with the teaching of Jesus recorded in Matthew 7:21: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who **does the will** of my Father in heaven.”

The inclination to falsely separate faith from works sometimes comes out in an overly restrictive definition of what it means to “worship God.” Let me explain this by making a distinction between “Worship A” and “Worship B, then suggesting that we should not create a false bifurcation between these two forms of worship. Rather we need to keep them together, as two sides of the same coin.

Worship A is comprised of the many good, traditional, time-honored ways in which we as Christians celebrate our Christian faith, expressing our gratitude for God’s grace in our lives, which is what we are pleased to do this morning.

The Biblical calling to participate in Worship A is clear.

Colossians 3: 16 – “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and **as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs** with gratitude in your hearts to God

Note the importance of singing songs of gratitude to God, as we gladly do each Sunday morning.

I Corinthians 11: 23-26 calls us to celebrate the Lord’s Supper instituted by Jesus himself – “... Do this in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

In celebrating the Eucharist, we truly celebrate the gift of god’s grace and love expressed in Jesus Christ

In Luke 2, the Bible brings to our attention the example of Anna, the prophetess. Who “did not depart from the Temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.”

So, Worship A includes hearing God’s word preached, singing, praying, fasting, and celebrating the Lord’s Supper – all good and important expressions of our Christian faith.

But the Bible gives us a solemn and scary warning. The Bible suggests that these good forms of Worship A can actually become destructive (can actually become abominations in the eyes of God).

This actually happened to the ancient Israelites, as recorded in Amos 5: 21-24 (I forewarn you that what I am about to read is very strong language spoken by God to Israel through the prophet Amos. I would hesitate to read this if it were not in the Bible).

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

The Israelites had ignored doing justice to the poor and needy around them, so there forms of Worship A became an abomination in God’s eyes. It would be tragic if God had to say to us some of us at American Reformed Church, “**Away with the noise of your songs.**”

Forms of Worship A becoming an abomination in God’s eyes was a perennial problem with the Israelites. Consider also the words of God to Israel through the prophet Isaiah as recorded in Isaiah 58:3-7.

“Why have we fasted, they [the Israelites] say and you [God] have not noticed?”

God responds through the prophet, “on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife. . . . Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice, and untie the cords of the yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked to cloth him.”

Jesus had a similar admonition for the supposedly “religious” people of his day, the scribes and Pharisees, as recorded in Matthew 23:23.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, **without neglecting the others.**”

What went terribly wrong with Worship A in these cases?

Worship A had degenerated into a means for self-absorption; a means to express self-interest.

The Israelites were singing and fasting while neglecting the people in their very midst who were poor, hungry, oppressed and naked. They became so preoccupied with their “spiritual disciplines” that they became oblivious to the suffering of the people all around them.

They needed to hear the teaching in I John 3:17-18 – “but if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.”

The Israelites had failed to see that it can indeed be an act of worship of God to attend to the needs of the poor, hungry, oppressed and naked.. They had failed to embrace Worship B.

Worship B is to give living expression to your Christian faith by doing the good works of serving other people; by committing yourself to meeting the needs of the people all around you, and beyond, who need your help.

But recall that Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees that practicing justice and mercy was not in place of tithing. They should practice justice and mercy **without neglecting** tithing.

So, it is both/and not either/or; both Worship A and Worship B. Worship A and Worship B should be two sides of the same coin; which is a special case of the teaching in James that faith and works should be two sides of the same coin.

We need to hear this message in our contemporary Christian Church

For we are deluged with the teachings of pseudo-spiritual hucksters who preach spiritual narcissism; a self-absorbed form of individualism that is particularly pernicious because it is clothed in spiritual language.

They try to tell us that what is important in the Christian life is that we “feel good about ourselves.”

Nonsense!

I have news for you. Feeling good about yourself is not a worthwhile end-in-itself. That goal will remain forever elusive if you seek it by absorption in yourself.

Don't get me wrong! I believe it is good to “feel good about yourself.” But “feeling good about yourself” is a **by-product** of living well by addressing the pressing needs of other people; a **by-product of being a servant**.

So, what does all of this have to do with the strange title of my meditation this morning?
– Bring a Chicken to the Communion Table.

My first hint is found in the following description of the Eucharistic (the Lord's Supper; Communion) that was published by a Church in the Catholic tradition.

The Eucharist is the living presence of Christ. In sharing that presence, the calling is to go out and **make that presence operational, living in the world**. That going out wears us out, so the Eucharist is both the beginning and the end; it draws us to it [the presence of Christ] and pushes us out into the world, and then draws us back. It is an overflow of the Lord's presence

Notice the inseparability of Worship A and Worship B in this description. The eucharist prepares us for serving other people and then renews us again after we serve other people.

But the connection between the Eucharist and serving other people can become even thicker; they can take place at the same time; as attested to by the following description of a three-part Eucharist liturgy in a fourth-century Christian Church.

A fourth-century mosaic survives in Aquileia in Italy that represents offertory procession in which women and men are bringing bread and wine, grapes and flowers, and a bird to the alter. It was a general practice that each man and women should place upon the alter a little loaf of bread and a small bottle of wine, representing the offering of self and the fruit of labor to God and to the community. The corporate presentation of material gifts – oil, olives, wax, cheese, poultry, honey and money for the sustenance of widows and prisoners – came to occupy the mid-point of the liturgy. The liturgy ended with all present consuming the bread and the wine while standing before the alter.

Imagine that, Christians actually bringing a chicken to the communion table, as well other goods to be distributed to those in need. It is important to realize that this unusual addition to the celebration of communion is not to diminish the importance of our traditional way of celebrating communion. Rather, it is to enlarge and enrich our traditional celebration by creating an integral connection between Worship A and Worship B.

Bringing chickens to our sanctuary at ARC could be a bit disruptive. But, with the blessing of the Worship Ministry team, we are actually going to do a modest variation of that ancient practice at our communion worship service on January 5.

Each of you is invited to bring food, in the form of a canned good, to the Communion worship service on January 5, which you can place in containers that will be provided at the front of the sanctuary during the offertory. The canned goods that you provide will be placed in the Food Pantry that ARC runs for our community, to be distributed to local residents in need.

It is my guess that some of you may not even be aware of the fact that ARC runs the local Food Pantry, under the capable leadership of Junia Punt. I attended ARC for about 15 years before I even knew where it was. I had to ask someone. Just in case you are in the same boat as I was, Junia will be available at the Food Pantry (which is downstairs) during the Coffee Fellowship time on January 5, ready to give you a quick tour, and explain to you how and to whom the food collected gets distributed

In conclusion, it is my prayer for myself and for each of you that we will not make a false choice between faith and works; that we will continue to come together to sing, to pray, to exhort and encourage one another, and to participate in the Eucharist; combining such forms of worship with the worship that is expressed when we address the needs of those around us, and beyond, who need our help.

Closing Prayer: Dear God help us to embrace the truth taught in the book of James that faith and works ought to be inseparable, and help us by thy grace to live out that truth in our daily lives. Amen.

Benediction (I Thessalonians 3:12): “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and for all.”

Go in peace.

Amen

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