

Two Visions, One Gospel (2/2)

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Catherine: The text for today is taken from the last chapters of the book of Acts. It is a portion of Luke's narrative of Paul's voyage to Rome and the shipwreck of Paul and his 275 companions. Paul, charged in a Roman court, used his Roman citizenship to appeal to the emperor. For this reason, he was being transported to Rome. Part way into the voyage, Paul, the prisoner, told the centurion who was guarding him that there was great danger if they left the safe harbor where they were to continue the trip. We are told that "the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship" and so they continued the voyage. However, as Paul had assumed, there was a terrible storm at sea. Several days passed with the ship in great danger. They threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship, but finally, Luke tells us that "all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned."

AETH

It is at that point that Paul has a vision of an angel who tells him that all on board will be saved because he, Paul, according to God's purposes, must stand before the emperor. After two weeks adrift at sea in such a storm, the place of our reading begins:

Listen then to a reading from Acts 27:33-38:

Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads." After he had said this, he took break; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of

them were encouraged and took food for themselves. (We were in all two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship.) After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea.

There are some very strange dynamics in the passage. Paul is a prisoner. In the verses before those that we read, Paul had already warned the centurion in whose charge he was that there would be great danger to all of them if they set sail. The ship's captain wished to go, however, and, as we have seen, the text says: "The centurion paid more attention to the captain and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said." That is hardly surprising. Why would a centurion listen to his prisoner—especially one who had no particular expertise in sailing—rather than to the people really in charge of such things? The pilot had his own expertise, and the owner probably felt that he would lose a lot if they could not get the cargo to its destination on time. It is clear from the earlier passage that the winter season was almost upon them when it was very dangerous to sail the eastern Mediterranean. The owner, for economic reasons, probably hoped to get on this one last trip.

Justo: This is not an experience foreign to the church today. Many, even within the church, would say that we would do better to leave such matters as international policy, economics, etc. to national experts. The church is not an expert on such matters as foreign policy or ecology or economics. The church should keep silent and let the experts in these areas speak. If the United Methodist bishops call for respect for creation, those who enrich themselves by polluting the environment immediately remind the world that the United Methodist Bishops are not experts on the environment. If the Roman Catholic bishops call for an economic order of justice and

mercy, those who live by exploiting others immediately remind the world that the Roman Catholic bishops are not economists. And when Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, complain about the nation's too quick resort to military action, we are told that we are not generals nor diplomats.

This is not a new argument. Presumably, that is what the centurion and the owner of the ship said to Paul when he advised them not to sail. Paul was no sailor. What did he know about winds and storms?

The sailors knew their business, true. But Paul had a word from the Lord. The experts know their business; but perhaps the church has a word from the Lord based on its study of Scripture. The polluters may pay for a thousand studies supporting their interests; economists may offer a thousand reasons why exploitation is justified; military intelligence may offer a thousand reasons why a certain course of action is justified... And still, the church may find itself obliged to say: "Thus saith the Lord."

Now when the storm came, Paul reminded his companions that he had warned them of the danger. But when he reminded them, it was not to say: "I told you so!" Rather, he has a new message, a world of hope and promise that has come to him. Everyone on shipboard will be saved as long as they don't try to leave the ship. Because of the mission Paul has, God has granted that all of his companions will be kept safely with him. There is no word that they will

have to believe, only that his companions will be brought safely through the storm because of Paul.

Even today, there are all sorts of invitations to think that the world will be saved by evermore sophisticated and more widespread use of technology, or by some superpower telling all the rest what they ought to do, or by a new global economy. But as Christians we should at least wonder: Could it be that, just as Paul's 275 companions were saved because of his faithfulness to his mission; could it be that the security of the world, even today does not ultimately lie in weapons or in trade agreements, but rather in God's love for the innocent who suffer in the midst of wars, for the innocent who do not even have an idea why wars are being fought, of the faithful who seek to practice justice in a world that seems to be breaking into pieces because of flagrant and widespread injustice?

Catherine: The early church applied this same understanding to itself. It believed that the small gathering of faithful Christians, though persecuted by the Roman Empire, still was the reason why that empire might continue to live in peace. In a letter written in the second century, the church is said to be like the soul in a body, it is that which gives it life and preserves it. Christians prayed for the emperor, for the government, even while these were the instruments of persecution against the church. In fact, these prayers, prayers for those outside the church, for the world at large, were a very important part of what were called "the prayers of the people." It was in these prayers that the community of faith, the baptized, exercised their role as the

priestly people of God. Baptism had given them that priestly role, the ability to intercede with God on behalf of those who could not pray for themselves because they did not know God. This is what the priesthood of believers meant to the early church.

We have so often lost much of this understanding. Either we assume that we are each our own priest, and therefore do not need anyone else, or else our corporate prayers of intercession are only for members and friends of the congregation. To return to the basic metaphor suggested by our shipwreck passage, we forget that we are in the same boat with the rest of the world, and that we are the ones who can pray for the whole enterprise, and that this task of intercessory prayer is part of the mission to which we have been called by our baptism.

Paul, however, had not forgotten this. The captain and the centurion technically were still in charge of things. But Paul, the prisoner, in a strange way took the helm. He did it by means of a meal.

There would be significance to any meal taken at such a time. The others on shipboard were rather like very sick people who did not care if they lived or died, and therefore did not want to eat. Food was probably the last thing on their minds after two weeks of storm at sea. In fact, the text says, "all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned." When a person in that condition eats some food, when their appetite returns, those around them know that the despair has been broken, that there is hope for the future. Paul ate before them, showing clearly that he

was not afraid, that he was convinced there was a future. And he encouraged them to do the same.

Any meal would have had significance. But there are overtones here of more than simply any meal. For Christians there are signs here of a very special meal, the Eucharist. Paul "took bread, and, giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat."

What does this mean? Is this a communion service? No, probably not in any technical sense. Yet, notice the effect on those who have no idea about the Lord's Supper. They were encouraged. They took heart. Were they converted? Did they believe? Not as far as we can tell from this passage. But the presence of a faithful witness to God made all the difference in the world to Paul 's shipmates. Paul worshiped, and they were encouraged, though they did not worship.

AETH

Justo: What difference does the worship of the faithful make to the rest of the world? On dealing with this question, too often we allow our vision to be limited by a pragmatic perspective. Liberal and conservative, we argue from the same premises. For some, the way the church makes a difference is by preaching the Gospel, by converting people. For others, the way the church makes a difference is by actively changing the structures of the world. Both are true, and to deny either would be a grave mistake. But both forget another dimension. Could it not be that the most important way the church makes a difference is merely by being present as a

witness to hope? Could it not be that the mere possibility of living in hope, without ignoring the terrible dangers facing the world, is already an important contribution to the world at large? Could it not be that the possibility of living in unity in a divided world, of living together justly in an unjust world, is in itself an announcement to the world of its own vocation, just as Paul's ability to live as a survivor gave courage to his shipmates?

All this sounds very good. But if this is true, it is also an awesome responsibility. If this is true, it means that we, the church, cannot fault the world for its injustice as long as we fail to give it the witness for which God has created us.

If we are truly concerned over the divisions in the world, and over the injustices emanating from them; if we are truly concerned about international tensions, about class injustice and the resulting hunger and homelessness, we must continue protesting against such evils, and we must continue seeking legislative and other forms of redress. But we must do more. We must seek to live out of a unity, a love and a justice that announce God's will of unity, love, and justice for the whole of humankind. Paul calls his shipmates to hope, and his call rings true because he lives in hope. We call the world to unity; but too often our call rings hollow because we allow ourselves to be divided, frequently by precisely the same issues that divide the world. Our congregations are relatively homogeneous in terms of race and class. We lack effective means of expressing our oneness. The world sees us as many churches, divided. The world sees us reflecting the greed and the injustice by which the world itself lives. The world may be more

realistic in its assessment of us than we are.

What Paul displays is a hope that takes account of the storm they are all experiencing. In our day, the church often preaches an individualistic message of love and forgiveness while ignoring the common storm in which we live; or else it discusses the problem of the storm in a way that does not encourage. Our fearfulness, rather than our hope, is shown.

Catherine: Paul's pagan shipmates had little idea of any deep religious significance of his actions. They had heard his words of encouragement, but now they saw very human actions, the actions of one who actually believes that there is a future, that there is hope. His actions encouraged them, and they imitated his actions. Whether they believed his words we do not know. But his actions encouraged them.

The text continues, that after they had eaten, they began to take steps to make survival more likely. They threw the wheat overboard in order to lighten the ship. Three times, in the account of the shipwreck, the crew threw things overboard to lighten the ship. The first to go is the cargo on the second day of the storm. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard. Now, on the fourteenth day, after having eaten their fill, they throw the rest of the wheat over. The order is interesting. The cargo is the least important for their survival. The owner may hate to lose it, but if the ship goes down, it will make no difference. It is not necessary for the ship's well-being. The ship's tackle is another matter. If they survive the storm, it will be difficult to

guide the ship without all the tackle; but if it is more dangerous to keep the tackle than to make the ship lighter, then it must go. But the wheat is what will be necessary for the lives of the passengers if they do survive. Why survive the storm only to die of hunger? So, the wheat is kept. But now, when Paul has encouraged them to eat, they now must make every effort to find land. They have their strength back, and so the wheat must go in order to make the ship as light as possible. The fact that they are now willing and able to get rid of the rest of the wheat is not a sign of despair, which it would have been before they ate, but the sign of the final push to save themselves.

Words are not enough, even if the Gospel we preach proclaims the greatest hope possible. What the world around us needs to see in the midst of the storm is the actions that people who really believe take because they believe. Such actions might well be imitated by those who are desperate for a way to go, a way through the storm. Our motivation is religious, and they may see only human acts. But that may be enough for them to begin imitating our actions, to act as those who believe a way through is possible, who have hope and therefore do not give up. And if we "Always are prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls us to account for the hope that is in us" (1 Peter 3: 15), we might find someone asking us about the reason for our hope.

The living sign of hope that Paul exhibited was eating because that was what was needed at the time. It was an individual act. However, we cannot overlook the need also for signs of hope that a whole faith community gives by the way it lives. Surely, we are each called to live out our faith.

But the world around us also needs examples of how the community can live, how neighbors can relate to one another, how people are very different from each other—through nationality, ethnicity, class, age, or other distinctions that divide the world—can love one another and work for the common good. Such a witness is very difficult when we meet as a congregation little more than one hour a week, or live scattered miles apart from one another. But we need to find ways that in a specific community, the witness of the church can be lived out as an example of the kind of society God intends the world to be.

Justo: Some years before these events, Paul had written to the Corinthians about another meal. We all know the words by heart. "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread...." The words that often pass unnoticed are "in the night." It was the night treason: "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." It was the night of anguish: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." It was the night when even the staunchest support would fade away: "This very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." It was one of the darkest nights of human history, to be surpassed only by the night that would follow the next day. And it was in the darkness of that darkest night that, as Paul had written, Jesus took bread, and he broke it, and out of that bread made the sign of hope for that night and for every other night in human history.

And now on another night, as our text says, "just before daybreak," on another night when there seemed to be no reason to hope, Paul "took bread, and having given thanks in the

presence of all, he broke it and began to eat."

This was probably not an Eucharistic celebration. But the use of exactly the same verbs, taking bread, giving thanks, breaking the bread, eating, gives us a hint that there is a connection. This Paul, who time and again has been fed by the Eucharistic act and who wrote about the night of the first Eucharist, now in this other night performs an act that, like its Eucharistic counterpart, is a sign of hope to the world.

Catherine: We like to kid ourselves, convincing ourselves that the witness to God's Word depends on us. But the truth is that if we are silent God can even make the stones cry out. And praised be to God, this stubbornly loving God of ours is such that even when the church is disobedient God will not be left without witnesses, without those who like Paul proclaim and show God's will to the world.

What is at stake here is not then the witness to the Gospel. We are not that important. God will bring a word of love and of hope even despite us. What is at stake is our obedience, our faithfulness. What is at stake is not the growth of the church, important as that may be. What is at stake is the very soul of the church.

Justo: The meal in today's passage has to do with survival. But it is more than that. It is a meal of hope, and therefore, a promise of a feast. The act of eating on a ship about to flounder is an

act of hope. It says to those aboard the ship: "There is a future!" In that sense, this meal, like the Eucharist, is an act of celebration. It celebrates not that all is rosy or that there are no problems, but that the future is in the hands of the host of all our meals and all our lives.

By its very act of praising God even in the most trying times, the church becomes a sign of hope in the midst of despair—a community proclaiming that God's world will not be shipwrecked, that there is hope, that there is a future.

This is what the life of the church in today's world is all about. What the life of the church celebrates is not that there is no evil in the world, but that all evil shall be overcome. The church must proclaim justice, not just because it is a timely theme, but because we know that justice will run down like waters. We eat not just to survive, but because we know that there will be a great meal when we shall be at our loving Parent's house, all of us as guests of honor. We welcome one another because we know that they shall come from the East and the West, and from the North and the South, and sit at table with the Lord. We work for peace in anticipation of the day when they shall study war no more; when they shall sit, each under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid. We console each other in the anticipation of the day when God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes. We rejoice and proclaim joy even in a world of pain and injustice and oppression, and we sing in a world of mourning, and we eat and feed others in a world of famine, as an announcement of the time when all the nights of betrayal and all the nights of shipwreck will be swept away into noontime

light. So be it. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

