

He Eats and Drinks with Sinners

Although many titles and descriptions for Jesus are rich, true, and lend themselves to meaning, within the context of that table and our Eucharist, none more breaks open a new covenant like the Christological title, Blasphemer. The blasphemy becomes undeniably stark and painfully difficult to avoid when that cup is offered and our bodies and blood mingle with and become quite indistinguishable from the body and blood of God. No other perception or title jars, surprises, offends and awakens us as does this title, Blasphemer. No other title might highlight and clarify the mission of this man. No other title more aptly indicates Jesus' understanding of who we are as a people who raise the cup, drink the cup, and offer it to one another. We can begin to understand what indeed makes this new covenant uniquely new.

Jesus addressed this perception and label early on in his life. The raising of this cup is but a culmination, and the drinking a consummation of his shocking and unsettling union of sacred and profane throughout his life and at the many tables prior to the last. He is perceived as being friendly toward the profane and powerless. He stands and walks among those warranting separation and walls, barriers, distance, and the garbage dump dwelling places.

Rather than assume a rescuing posture at those tables and in those dwellings, he instead reclines, drinks, eats, and appears to raise up a blasphemous cup of blessing in those places and with those people where barriers and clear boundaries were thought to be legal, right, justified, and holy.

At these tables he clearly blasphemes by inviting friendship and intimacy with the unclean and unlikely. This blasphemy is characterized not only by an exaggerated, excessive, and extreme perception of his own goodness and godliness but the startling and dangerous conviction that others were likewise formed and created. Friends and leaders of the law wondered whether Jesus was not muddying the waters of the holy and the human. Since uniting the holy and the human was blasphemy, his contemporaries began to conclude that Jesus suffered from an apparent distortion of vision: a seeing of godliness where that godliness is thought to be most absent. Is it not a mingling of holy and human that the old covenants viewed as divided by enmity, opposites, at war with one another? Was Jesus proposing to render this old way obsolete? Blasphemy in the life of Jesus was about bridging clean and unclean, first and last, the least and the greatest.

The charge at his trial, then, is not surprising, but rather a consistent consequence of a life of faulty, muddled vision: a life of seeing God in all things and most poignantly in places where God could not possibly be. The sentence and place of execution befits the crime: blasphemous blood and life could not be spilled in view of upright persons and on sacred streets of the "holy city". Better to mock him and execute him surrounded by those he proclaimed were so holy, so godly; who were surrounded by garbage and separated by the gate and wall.

Yet, powerfully blasphemous images and words are etched on our memories. Blood that is shed in disgrace and humiliation rips the temple curtain of separation and cries for unimaginable inclusion of those kept afar. The blood of Jesus is faithfully blasphemous. He utters one last blasphemy in painting a picture of paradise and naked union with God to a fellow criminal sharing that garbage dump dwelling of death.

Was the joy at that final table about Jesus being able to be in communion with the godly image of who we are? Was he in communion calling that to our awareness? Approaching the table, our "Amen" is nothing short of an unwavering and stubborn belief in the fundamental godliness of all human life.

Our hands are not empty approaching this table. They hold out a life that is abundant, colored by contradictions and alternations. Yet, we are in the very image of the One who breathed into this body that we hold out for communion. Our "Amen" is a firm "Yes" to the inheritance that has been promised and given to all those who have been freed from slavery and drawn to a new friendship and partnership with God. Leaving the table, we know we have been reminded once again of who we are, blasphemous though it might be.

The body and blood of Christ is reminding us of the union that has made our own body and blood indistinguishable from God's. A crucial moment at that table is when the blood birthed a new covenant characterized by friendship rather than servitude. A cup of blessing is joyfully and confidently raised and shared proclaiming a conviction that indeed life is the stronger over the death dealing temptations of self hatred and the violence it breeds.

It is just such honest conversation with the One who blasphemed in calling us friends that the mystery of faith is affirmed and we choose to believe again that our blood is precious as is the blood of all that lives.

The last words we hear, "Do this in memory of me," haunt us. We know that this phrase has been minimally reduced to a consecration mandate given to future priests. Yet further contemplation broadens the vision. The entire evening is to be reclaimed. Friends are to "do" what Jesus did: the intimacy with brokenness, the union, the washing of feet, the

belief in our creation, claiming again a birthright image. We are sent forth and commissioned to be body and blood that it is no less blasphemous than the one who first longed to close the gap and to unite with that which we had been told was separate.

So this new family, this new covenant, is nothing less than a household of friends courageously uttering blasphemies in the face of the world that call into question and sometime cynical doubt, the Good News: all that was once considered afar, distant, outside has, by blasphemous blood, been brought near. In consuming that blood of Christ, we consummate a union longed for by God and us.

Leaving that table, empowered by the memory of the blood of Jesus, our body and blood will experience a compelling attraction to be blasphemous. We find ourselves seeking out the distant and the disadvantaged of our day and our tables will become bigger than when we first entered the room.

We will discover among us a growing tendency to be easily spontaneous, and often offended by exclusion, rank, dualism, and the ungodly distancing of human and divine, his blood and ours. We will find this thought and behavior in ourselves, our church, and our world to be distasteful, wrong, and sometimes enraging, all of which will loosen our tongues, curing that which is mute.

Some might observe us as being lopsided, lax, or loose. We might well be accused of overemphasizing the fundamental goodness of ALL blood and life. There might well even be moments of ridicule and mockery as we admit that we don't know how a new household of God would look were all people treated as though they were gods.

Without little doubt, we will also experience the charge and the trial of the first blasphemer. We might also be forced from the mainstream finding ourselves outside the gates for having led the people astray. Being newly displaced and perhaps finding ourselves, maybe for the first time, to be strangers and aliens in this new place, it might take us aback as those who have always lived there provide us with a table, some of their bread and a cup to be raised up and shared. In that moment we might know for the first time what it is to "go to him, then, outside the gates and bear his humiliation, sharing in his degradation" with an odd and surprising peace and joy."

(Fr. Greg Comella, C.P.P.S. "Body and Blood as Blasphemy", The New Wine Cellar, February 1995, pp. 16-23)