

A Tale of Two Tables:

The Practices of Coffee and Communion

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It is another Sunday morning. Although the Sabbath, it is virtually like every other day. My alarm clock buzzes, I awake, roll out of bed, and start my hurried morning ritual. Besides the slight differences - ironing a suit instead of casual pants and waiting until I arrive at church before I drink my first cup of coffee, it is no different than any other weekday. I shower, brush my teeth, fix my hair, apply makeup, and dress with the proper accessories and within forty minutes of the alarm going off, I am in my car driving to church. I drive to church, smiling that once again I am impressed at myself for getting ready in a short amount of time. I arrive at church greeting church members as I walk down the hall to my office to retrieve my coffee cup.

All is normal and routine until I run into David. David is a twelve-year old youth, who on this particular morning chooses to lecture me on the harmful effects of coffee to my digestive system rather than greeting me with a normal hello. After five minutes of listening to David, I agree that coffee is not good for me and then struggle with the inadequacy of my words to explain my daily need for caffeine. Uncomfortable with my own inability to explain my desire for such a “drug”, I decide that it is time to send David upstairs to the youth Sunday school. I continue to the fellowship area, where I greet the other young and middle-aged adults gathered around coffee and donuts, fill up my cup, drink, and commune.

Craig Dykstra and Dorthy Bass define Christian practices as “things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.” In this sense, for our church, gathering around the coffee table is a Christian practice. Various members of the church have talked around similar tables for years, sharing and connecting with each other over their cup of joe. The coffee table is a tradition and it serves a need, but does drinking coffee honor God’s active and creative presence in the world? Mainly, does it honor the body, the reflection of God’s image and

creativity? If a twelve-year old perceives my morning cup of coffee as bad, and I know it is harmful, what damage am I doing to my body and the Body of Christ?

From what I can tell the morning cup of coffee has been a tradition at the church for a long while. We learn how to drink coffee from our elders. Like many of the things our bodies do, we simply learn them from interactions with others. Our parents, Sunday School teachers, grandparents, and youth leaders are all accustomed to drinking coffee before the service and we watched them do so from an early age. I remember serving in a church where each morning the Junior High Sunday school teacher would take the Junior High class down to the fellowship area to get donuts while she refilled her coffee cup. It was not long before the junior high girls were trying their own coffee filled with lots of sugar and cream with their donut too. For them, drinking coffee during the Sunday school hour was what adults did, and they wanted to be adults. So, the pattern of this Christian practice was being ingrained in them at an early age.

Coffee helps me to feel better every morning, but especially on Sunday morning. I know that I feel more awake and more able to fully participate in the worship service when I am prepared and caffeinated. Without it, I sometimes wonder if I might nod off during the service. With it, I feel prepared, upbeat, revived, and rejuvenated, ready to intently listen to the sermon, the prayer concerns, and the lyrics of the music, and more able to carry out my tasks as a minister. It transforms my being from being from old to new and from being asleep to waking up into the land of the living. In coffee, I feel I am a new creation.

Coffee is an important asset to my day, and on Sundays drinking it with the members of my church makes it even more important. Coffee hour is a meaningful time for the adults at our church. The coffee table has created a community of its own for those who do not exactly fit into our Sunday school curriculum. Every Sunday we sit, talking about our lives and the week's

activities over a cup of coffee, watching as choir members and other Sunday School class members come and go, each filling their cup up and grabbing a donut. In our church we do not get up for communion, we pass it down the aisles instead, but we have no problem walking to a different level to gather around the coffee table. It is our common cup, the common element that brings us together for communication. It is the place where we tell our stories, the place that brings us together before we head to the sanctuary for the service. It is a table that we gather around.

Communing around the coffee table serves an important communicative function at the church, but the coffee alters my physical being – God’s creation. It overrides my body’s signals of fatigue and allows me to feel awake despite lack of much needed rest. In caffeinating, I do not honor the signals of my body or the restful commandment of the Sabbath, and I also set an improper example for others who might not yet understand what the Sabbath is about. If I watch as girls the same age as David think that they must drink coffee to be an adult and I know that coffee is bad for me, is coffee for me what unclean meat is to the Corinthians? Is it that by my example I pollute the Body of Christ causing other members to fall?

The body is the primary way in which we interact with the world. One cannot communicate, work, learn, worship or be without one’s body. To be human is to have a body. And that body is the way one connects to every aspect of their life. Not to honor the body is to separate one from participating in life. We cannot separate our bodies from the rest of our psychological being or our daily lives. Unlike Virginia Slim or the Marlboro Man, habits are reflected in our whole lives. When someone is dependent on a habit, good or bad, it alters their life. When someone is addicted to a substance, such as cigarettes, they are constantly wondering when they will be able to have another smoke. Advertising limits us to only see Virginia in the

comfort of her home and Mr. Marlboro on his farm, but habits effect all aspects of our life. A habit cannot be separated from one's lifestyle.

Not to honor the body is to separate one's self from participating in life through feelings and emotions. In the book *Minding the Body*, edited by Patricia Foster, there are countless essays of women whose personal struggles often involve perceptions with their body that lead to eating disorders and unhealthy lifestyles. What is apparent in the readings of these essays is that a woman's experience of her body, be it sex, weight loss or gain, childbirth, or illness cannot be separated from the feelings that a woman has about herself. For a woman to accept what her body is and does is to accept herself. Although the stories of these women's bodies are often sad ones, each woman overcomes her struggle by learning that her body is undeniably a part of who she is.

Smoking not only leads to personal dependence, but can also cause illness that effects family and friends. Our bodies not only connect us to ourselves, but are also what connect us to others as well. This is what Stanley Hauerwas calls the "communicative body". In Hauerwas' view, illness is the best way to overcome the popular cultural stereotype that our mind, soul, and will are separated from our physical selves. When we are sick we realize not only that there is no difference between our mind and body, but we also realize that we need help from others. We cannot receive that help until we are able to communicate - until we are able to tell the story of how our body feels. We cannot separate ourselves from our own bodies, nor can we separate our bodies from other people. We are communicative people who learn from interaction with others. We are dependent on others to help us with our physical needs, to care for us, and to teach us how to live. Although caffeine may not be good, the coffee table serves a function in that it allows us to communicate with one another. It is how we relate, how we hear prayer concerns,

how we share joys, and how we learn to help our friends when they have had a bad week. We communicate there through our bodies. Coffee hour unites us, it lets us hear our stories, and it prepares us for worship by connecting us and allowing us to help each other.

Our bodies connect us with God as well. Just as we often forget that what we do to our physical selves ultimately effects our ability to function mentally, spiritually, and psychologically within our own being and with our interactions with others, we often forget that what we do to our bodies effects our relationship with God. With the right gym plan, right diet, liposuction, Botox, plastic surgery, new hairstyle or a little makeup we are able to alter our physical image. With Prozac, Ritalin, alcohol, and caffeine we are able to alter our psychological and emotional states of being. We think we can be the masters of our own creation.

While we are able to alter our creation, ultimately we cannot recreate it. Medicine and makeup wear off, wrinkles and fat return over time, and hair must constantly be re-dyed and cut. All these things remind us that we cannot permanently recreate self. Instead, God creates us. As God's creation, I am not fully the master of my body. Instead, I am dependent on the one who mastered my creation long ago. God created me in God's image and Godself knew that God needed rest. On the seventh day after Creation God rested and God instructs us to rest as well. One day of the week God instructs me to be dependent on God rather than myself because God knows that I need rest. Yet within the first hour of this Sabbath I have not rested but have rushed to church. Instead of enjoying the fullness of the morning with prayer, adoration, and peacefulness, my Sabbath only begins after I get to church and take time out to prepare for my day through prayer or, on hectic days, when the organist starts the prelude. This is not honoring my body or the instructions God gives me for my body.

God created my body to worship. We are able to worship because of our bodies. Any typical Christian worship service is filled with bodily movements and sights. We see the sanctuary through our eyes- the cross, the windows, the people, the pulpit, the preacher, and the Biblical text. We hear the service through our ears – the sermon, the music, the prayers, and the Biblical text. We feel the interaction and movement of the Holy Spirit – through the shaking of hands, through hugging, through the plate which we pass, through the pencil and paper in our hand as we take notes, through the movement of standing and sitting, and folding our hands in prayer. We taste Jesus Christ in the fullness of the elements that we take to be the Body of Christ. Without our bodies, we cannot worship. Without our bodies we cannot experience the Body of Christ.

Through the practice of worship, I realize that my body is related to my spirit, my congregation, and my relationship with God. Although not a good desire, the very desire to drink caffeine tells me that there is a connection between my body and my worship space. I know that I must be fully awake to be in full communion with the divine and with my brothers and sisters during the service. The quick fix to this is through my not so tastily brewed cup of hot coffee from the kitchen of First Christian Church. I know that the better alternative would be getting proper amounts of sleep at night, waking up at a proper time in the morning, not rushing through my day, and instead fully enjoying the day that God has given me, but I have learned at church that coffee is the fast way to do that. I have not learned how to fully honor a healthy lifestyle that respects all elements of my body, mind, soul, and spirit that awaken me daily.

Almost two hours after we gathered at the coffee table in the fellowship area, we are gathered around a different table, this time the communion table. It is there that we commune speaking together a litany based on the words of Paul in 1 Cor. 11: 23-26 –

Pastor: For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said,

All : “**This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.**”

Pastor: In the same way also the cup, after supper saying,

All: **This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.**”

Pastor: For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.

All: **God our help: We thank you for this supper, shared in the spirit with your son Jesus, who makes us new and strong, who brings us life eternal. We praise you for giving us all good gifts in Him and pledge to ourselves to serve you, even as in Christ you have served us. Amen.**

From what I can tell, the repeating of these words has been a tradition of the church for a good long while. We learn how to pour and drink and take and eat from our elders. Like many of the things our bodies do, we simply learn them from interactions with others. Our parents, Sunday school teachers, grandparents, youth leaders, and disciples all were and are accustomed to participating in the Body of Christ. We watched them do so from an early age.

At the table, I recognize what it means to be fully connected with myself. Two hours have passed; I am no longer feeling jittery from the coffee. The caffeine high has worn off; no longer am I concentrated on being a master of self-alteration, but in Christ I look toward being a new creation. I am not rushing. Instead, I am able to sit, honoring God with my whole body in its natural state. I sit, this time honoring my body not through physical alteration, but through quiet prayer, meditation, and restfulness. I look to Christ who makes me feel new and strong and I feel transformed from tired to awake, from old to new, from death to life.

It is at the communion table that I am connected with others. Remembering individuals and their conversations at the coffee table, I think about their concerns, their prayers, and their weeks to come. It is at this table that I connect with them and all of God's children. It is here together with them, that we pledge to serve God because in Christ God serves us. It is through the table that we become the Body of Christ together.

At the communion table, I connect with God. Through worship and through the remembrance of Jesus Christ, I am physically able to taste and see the goodness of God. With my body I worship, with my body I experience the Body of Christ around me and the Body of Christ within me.

As I leave worship, I return to the fellowship area for a potluck dinner. I wonder if I will do more damage to my body by eating fried chicken, dessert, and drinking more coffee. I think I will make it a point to ask the person next to me in line about their week, their joys, and their concerns, but I think I will choose water instead of coffee.

Works Cited

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