

**Thanksgiving: Become What We Eat**  
The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor  
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church  
The First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2009

It's been such a wonderful weekend – with Thanksgiving at the heart of it all, beginning last Sunday when we celebrated our 195<sup>th</sup> birthday as a congregation with presidential speeches in Luther Hall – that it's hard to switch gears and think about the First Sunday of Advent, with its images of fiery destruction promised with the Judgment Day ushering in of the end of history with the arrival of God's kingdom. Perhaps a better way to begin this transition is to stick with the word “thanksgiving” for a while longer. There's more to this word than football, turkey and pumpkin pie. Another feast, the Feast of the Altar, which we celebrate with Holy Communion, has another name, a Greek name, *Eucharist*, which comes from the verb *eu-char-ist-e-o*, which means *giving thanks*, or thanksgiving.

It goes back to Paul's original quote (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:23-26) recounting how it was on the night in which he was betrayed, that Jesus took the bread, and after *giving thanks*, he broke it and gave it to them saying, “Enjoy the food, take a nap, watch the game!” No, he said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me.” Remembering Jesus meant more than a passing thought recalling how it used to be in the good, old days. It meant calling to mind all the details of Jesus presence among us ... in living color, with such vivid detail that it was not only “as if” Jesus were present today. That's exactly what it was, and is, namely, Jesus present with us in the bread and the wine, as we remember the earliest accounts of his table fellowship with sinners who became his followers, which, again, is exactly as it is today, sinners embraced by God's grace, filled with Christ's love, empowered by the Spirit's presence, ordinary sinners turned into saints, friends and followers of a living Lord, who comes to us through this holy meal.

One of my favorite Thanksgiving anecdotes refers back to some groundbreaking work done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Ludwig Feuerbach, the lesser of the three great German names that paved the way for the popularity of atheism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There was Sigmund Freud, the father of psycho-analysis, and well known by most; there was Karl Marx, the architect of Marxist-Leninist Socialism, which has had quite an impact on the world around us; and there was this lesser known philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, who like Marx (and before Marx) rejected the head-in-the-clouds idealism of his teacher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, whose primary and unparalleled contribution to Western culture was to argue – and prove – that Christianity, and its influence on Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the apex of spiritual development in the history of the world! He was the toast of the town back in his day – which began in 1806 with the publication of *The Phenomenology of the Mind*.

In any event, Feuerbach came out with this line, which I have had fun associating with our American celebration of Thanksgiving: “You are what you eat!” Now, I understand

that the turkey has long been maligned as a dumb bird without much smarts. Perhaps some of you remember the holiday episode from the old sitcom *WCRP in Cincinnati*. Marilyn and I, along with Austin (for the first nine years of his life), and Anna (for the first six years of hers) lived in Cincinnati before moving to northeast Ohio back in 1994. This one particular episode had Mr. Carlson going along with a station promotion, a *Great Turkey Give-Away* for the community, which distributed turkeys by dropping them from airplanes ... for effect. Well, everyone soon found out that turkeys can't fly! As an aside, I should say that Marilyn and I met at Thanksgiving some thirty-four years ago; and this raised-on-a-farm girl from Iowa has spent these past three-and-a-half decades marveling on what sophisticated city folk don't know!

I read online that Dr. Tom Savage, a poultry scientist with the OSU Animal Sciences Department, has spent a 30-year career challenging the dumb turkey myth, all the while admitting that these birds are rightly known for tilting their heads back during a storm and looking up into the clouds until they drown! They're awkward when they run, and even funnier when they attempt to fly. Actually, as it turns out, Dr. Savage hasn't made much headway in his efforts to rehabilitate the image of the domestic American turkey. But Feuerbach wasn't making a point about turkeys, whether as the main course for dinner on Thanksgiving, or as the punch-line for the behavior of losers. Feuerbach was not making a point about human behavior or human cuisine. He was challenging our belief in the existence of God. He was challenging folks to get their heads out of the clouds, and focus on what's real here on earth. He wanted us to focus our minds on nature, not super-nature and the supernatural. He wanted us to join science in learning about the world of nature, which can be known, examined, analyzed, and measured.

Feuerbach, like Marx and Freud, thought of God as a projection of human imagination. It is we who create God by projecting very real human values, hopes, and strengths onto a mythical creator in the heavens who commands us with great might, and protects and comforts us, wiping our tears and holding our hand, guiding us as we head into an unknown future and into the great unknown we fear as death. Does any of this sound familiar? It should, because it's the debate that modern day science has taken up in challenging the persistence of traditional religions. Blair Woodside posted this debate as he found it in the *Wall Street Journal* several months ago on our bulletin board in the main hallway. Richard Dawkins versus Karen Armstrong, science versus religion, on the question of whether the evolutionary thinking of Darwin has not only relegated God to the sidelines of scientific discovery, but has also finally exposed religious faith as nothing more than an ancient crutch, which we need to evolve beyond for the sake of truth and freedom, with science serving as the cornerstone of this brave new world.

Religion as myth, faith as a crutch, God as a projection: these are the battles Feuerbach set in motion with his line, "You are what you eat!" Oddly enough, when Jesus instituted the Last Supper as the cornerstone of Christian faith, he didn't have his mind in the clouds, as if he were reflecting on the mere existence of a care-taker deity. He was inviting his followers to participate in practical, down-to-earth disciplines that made

God's love real here in this world. Communion with Jesus has from the beginning involved having an open and inclusive table, where the hungry are fed, the ostracized are welcomed, and the poor have good news shared with them. Jim Fidler is going to offer a very interesting perspective on Holy Communion with his Advent drama this evening. All of us will want to be here for that, as well as for the great meal that the Men of Zion are preparing for us. But more to the point for this morning, Feuerbach's line offers some instructive advice in challenging us to understand Holy Communion as the invitation to become what we eat and drink with the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Paul saw this back in the first century when he proclaimed the connection between our eating the body of Jesus in communion and our becoming the Body of Christ in the world.

In all honesty, I have never bought the hypothesis that God is nothing more than a projection of human hopes and ideals. All we need do is to look at our God, crucified on the cross, rejected by a world that refused to recognize the truth he embodied, the good news he proclaimed, the new life he envisioned, died for, and calls us to live. I would say that Karen Armstrong has the stronger point in the newspaper article posted in the main hallway. Here's what she writes: "All major religions [and certainly ours] insist that the faithful meditate [not just on our hopes and ideals, but that we meditate] on the ubiquitous suffering that is an inescapable part of life." What is more, she rightly reminds us that "if we don't acknowledge this uncomfortable fact, then the compassion that lies at the heart of faith is impossible" to cultivate, nurture, express, and embody. (The "Weekend" edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, September 12—13, 2009)

Isn't that a big part of what the thanksgiving of communion invites us to ponder and practice? The *Eucharist* celebrates the body broken and the blood outpoured for us, in order to proclaim God's love, and more, to display it, by showing us what God's love looks like, what true love cost God, and what sharing this love with one another and the world may cost us. God's love, revealed in the Cross of Christ, takes the suffering of the world upon Himself so that He might transform our suffering with the promise of His presence alive among us. Love and suffering are inextricably intertwined in the mystery of Holy Communion. We're not simply talking about hopes and ideals. We are looking at the truth of God's love, the power of Christ's presence, and the guidance offered with the Holy Spirit's help as we find our way through life, by first receiving the love God gives, and then becoming it, in other words, by living it ... in Jesus' name. Amen

[In his portrayal of Jesus' gift of the Last Supper, Jim Fidler helped to raise the key question that arises with this Sacrament and our celebrating it rightly. The litany from the evening service put it like this: "The main question in Holy Communion is not, 'How is Christ present?' The question in the Lord's Supper is, 'Will we make Christ present through the worship we offer and the lives that we live?'" Here's how Jim said it while portraying Jesus in our Sunday evening drama: "When I said in my Supper, 'Do this to remember me,' I meant more than think about me. In my Supper, I call you to remember that because you are mine, you are to share yourself with those who need you." That's how Jesus comes to life in us, and that's how we learn to live ... in Jesus' name.]