

# Walking the Talk

Rob Eller-Isaacs

February 7th, 2010

She was a life-long activist, a passionate advocate for the needs and rights of woman and children and people who are poor; he, a savant, disabled and brilliant, brutally honest and often quite wrong. Yesterday they had stood on opposite sides of a barricaded street, chanting slogans, she for a woman's right to choose, he in support of what he saw as the sanctity of life. She saw him over there. He was too self-absorbed to recognize someone he knew from the church. Today,

Thanksgiving Sunday, they stood in opposite lines slowly moving toward the communion table. In that church the people held the cup for one another. As his turn came to drink he suddenly realized that the woman offering the cup was someone he had seen across the street the day before. “Hey weren’t you...” he blurted out, his outburst audible above the choir. “Hush,” she said. “Hush, just drink.”

Paul Tillich, one of the great liberal theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote in The Life of Faith: *the drive toward the reunion of the separated is love. The concern of faith is identical with*

*the desire of love; reunion with that to which one belongs and from which one is estranged.* This is the first of four services about love. We begin with what the Greeks have called agape. The word refers to charity and to the Eucharist, that ritual meal that is at the very heart of Christian worship. Unlike romantic love or the love that grows out of friendship, agape refers to the power of a ritual meal to enlighten and unite both friends and strangers.

Such ritual meals are not unique to Christian practice. In every great tradition, feast days are most often times when

strangers are explicitly welcomed. In Islam the opportunity to feed a hungry stranger is considered a great blessing. The Asian traditions likewise offer times when adherents gather over food in order to experience the nourishment of spiritual reunion. In the early Christian church agape was sometimes associated with the sacrament of communion but from the second century on it evolved into a real meal seldom held on a Sunday at which the host would gather both friends and strangers, particularly neighbors who were poor or whom the host hoped to reconcile. The host provided the food in exchange for which

guests were asked to pray for him. This particular agape tradition had disappeared by the 8<sup>th</sup> century but was revived during the Reformation among the Moravians, the Mennonites and eventually among the Methodists.

Whether the meal is real or symbolic, all of us long for the food of the Spirit. Emerson resigned his pulpit and left the Unitarian ministry in part because he could not in good conscience continue to serve communion. Some claim he was rejecting the Eucharist as irrational. How, they ask, could a scholar of his stature believe in the literal transubstantiation of

wine into blood and bread into flesh. But Unitarians never believed in transubstantiation. Jesus knew the power of a good metaphor. From the very beginning there have been two basic Eucharistic theologies at play in Christian practice. A great majority of Christian churches espouse belief in the mystical transformation of bread into flesh and wine into blood. But there have always been those Unitarians and Universalists among them who have practiced communion in response to Jesus saying to the apostles and through them to us, "Do this in memory of me." Emerson decided he could no longer serve the

Lord's Supper because his people had become numb to its ritual power. It simply had become a hollow form. They were only going through the motions. He knew they needed so much more but he had no idea how to enlist and organize their longing.

There are still a few Unitarian Universalist congregations who regularly serve communion but most have followed Emerson's lead and left it behind. The trouble is we haven't left behind our need to be inspired and united in ways which a shared and prayerful meal can make real. Some years ago I

went to hear a lecture by Robert Richardson, the preeminent Emerson scholar of our generation. After a wonderful presentation in which he told us that Emerson didn't lack respect for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it was just that he considered them colleagues, I asked him a question. Given how dry and rarified liberal worship has become in our time do you think Emerson would have called us back to the communion table? Do you think that Emerson, committed as he was to the centrality of personal experience in pursuit of the religious life, would see communion as a way to encourage spiritual



transformation? He smiled at the question but he is too much a scholar to hazard an answer.

What I know is that we have become too critical. We have become so wary of being abused and manipulated by twisted scripture and outdated understandings that we have cut ourselves off from rituals which deepen our spiritual lives. I would never sacrifice our commitment to the efficacy of reason but I do think we should strive to strike a better balance between mind and heart in the practice of our faith. I am convinced we need to find new ways and perhaps to recover

some old ways that help us to open our hearts and our homes to all the neighbors we have yet to know. One of the new ways to restore a sense of agape in the life of the church is to make the Sources Supper a regular part of your own liturgical year. Don't say, "Been there, done that" just because you attended last year. With word and song the Sources Supper is intended to help us to learn and remember our history, awaken the desire to share our faith with others and inspire conversations which deepen our lives. In the agape tradition those of you who sign up today to host a dinner are free to ask your guests

to pray for you at the conclusion of the ritual meal and everyone who carves out time to attend can anticipate food for the Spirit.

Do you remember Violet, the elder from that little congregation in Seattle? After offering, through clenched teeth, the communion prayer she had written before hearing her minister's troubling message, Violet left the church. The story continues: "Two months later, the church board responded to the controversies by voting to affirm the minister's position. Those who wanted the minister fired left

the church, and for the next few months, the church struggled to survive...A few months after the board vote, Violet returned to the church. When the service was over, she stopped on her way out to tell the minister she had wrestled for a long time with her faith. She had finally decided that what she had written on that wad of paper and prayed to God over the communion table was what she really believed. She was did not understand homosexuals and was uncomfortable with them, but her faith required her to welcome them As she settled back into church life, she began to ask prayers for her

alcoholic son, something she had never done before...The community slowly knitted itself together through bonds of honesty about their lives and their willingness to care about each other as members of one diverse community...In their willingness to be together in struggle, they achieved a greater openness to the diversity of the world in its heartbreaks and its goodness.”

The time has come for us to acknowledge the debt we owe to Christianity. It is the tap root of our faith. Though our understanding of what scripture can be has broken far beyond

the Bible and though Emerson and other Transcendentalists helped move us beyond the limitations of dogmatic Christian claims we none-the-less are nourished by the ministry of Jesus. Those who would exclude us from the table mistake its core purpose.

I understand the discomfort and confusion some of you experience when the church you've come to love, a church which you believe has moved beyond the hollow rituals and static hypocrisy you thought you'd left behind, considers incorporating old rituals into its life. But if we are to become

the church we claim we wish to be we will have to find ways to inspire and unite that cut beyond the limitations of language, restore us in the love of God and strengthen us as instruments of love and healing in the world.. On that communion Sunday long ago I watched and wept as two church members who the day before had stood on opposing sides of the most divisive, controversial issue of our time served one another. “Hey, weren’t you at the rally yesterday?” he blurted out. “Hush,” she said. “Hush, just drink.” The feast is spread, let all who hunger come and eat. May it be so and amen.

