

**Sermon: Shhhh, Don't Tell**  
**Scripture: Ephesians 5:8-14**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: April 3, 2011**

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We gather on this the first Sunday of the month of April 2011 to partake in the sacrament of communion. It is a subversive, counter-cultural act that we are participating in here behind closed doors. It's a good thing that the people in the wider community really have no idea what's going on in here. And when you leave here after our ritual you might not want to tell anyone what's happened. I don't think they will understand.

What I mean is: it's not exactly kosher in the spiritual milieu of this day and region to go looking outside of ourselves for answers that we are being told can be found quite naturally within us if simply look within. And yet when we pray in this building and confess and ask for forgiveness and partake in communion, we are suggesting that the source, the inspiration, the purpose of our life is outside of ourselves. The spiritual practice that we engage in each Sunday here is not a turning inward to find the inner resources we need to move outward into our week ahead so much as it is a turning outward toward God, to hear about Jesus Christ with whom we can be in relationship, to pray and sing with others whom we are in relationship with. We come here and turn our inner lives outward believing that there is a True North external to us by which we can reset our internal compass in order to live how we most want to live.

And don't tell them, especially New Englanders who place such a high value on autonomy and independence, that in here were tend to believe that the spiritual path is necessarily a communal one. You might want to keep it quiet if on some level you feel like you NEED to come to church because you need not a solitary spiritual path but you need other people for your spiritual growth and development.

And furthermore, there could be a real problem if people knew, especially in this very precarious economy, that behind these closed doors on Sunday mornings we were regularly being reminded and encouraged that life is more than our purchases and entertainments, that life is more than our own personal happiness. In here we reference a power far more dominant and benign and demanding of our commitment than even the market and our country; in fact a power to whom we owe our very existence. And many

of us who come in here might even feel guilty or ashamed when we forget that, when we lose track of that and place other powers before and above God.

Ooops, and I stepped right in it by referring to guilt because guilt is definitely not in vogue anymore, especially church-induced guilt! So many people who used to go to church or grew up in the church or synagogue for that matter say that they shook off religion because of the guilt trip they were always on. But I look around and see a nation entering into a 3<sup>rd</sup> war and I see a government about ready to cut programs that help the most vulnerable among us and unwilling to address in a serious way the environmental crisis and the continuing disparity between the rich and the poor and I think – “I don’t know maybe some healthy guilt could do us a little good these days!” So definitely don’t go out there after this service telling people that you confessed your guilt and received forgiveness and inspiration for doing better in the coming days. It’ll sound so Old School to them if not archaic.

And then don’t even try to explain what we are doing here with this table and the bread and juice that we call the body and blood of Jesus cause it just won’t make sense. Then you’ll really sound like you’ve gone off the deep end. Don’t even start to explain how this represents a very particular and unique way of understanding God not as One who takes away our suffering or promises to eliminate our struggles, but rather a God who suffers and struggles along with us. Here we don’t proclaim that God is FOR us, nor that God is purely WITHIN us, nor that God is BEYOND us but rather here we proclaim a belief in a God who is WITH us. That’s what “incarnation” means – “God with us” – and in the broken body and the blood of Jesus, we get even more specific and suggest that God is not with us like a mighty King or a Judge or a Police Officer, but specifically that God is with us in the struggle and the suffering of life. This means that as we partake of the bread and juice which represents the body and blood of Jesus, his very suffering and brokenness and his death itself, we are remembering and reminded that our own suffering, our own tough battles, whatever they might be, are not places where we are most separate from God or where we have been banished from God or fallen out of the grace with God but where we are actually closer to the raw and real presence of God. In our suffering, we are broken open and we participate in Christ’s brokenness.

A theologian I was listening to recently said this and I'm hesitant to say it's true but it's worth considering and you decide for yourself if he's got a point. He said that in a disaster or tragedy or a place of great suffering the question of where God is in this is more often on the lips of those who are witnessing it or hearing about it, while on the lips of the suffering one's themselves are being formulated prayers to the God of their lives, no longer doubts and questions but simple hearted and faithful prayers, for there is something that the sufferer knows that the onlooker does not and that is the very real presence of God with the sufferer.

So all that I'm saying is don't tell anybody that in here we worship a suffering God, a God who blesses our suffering and the suffering of the world with His presence. I think it'll sound really strange to those who expect to hear how we believe in a victorious God who takes away suffering and whose benefits we receive and who makes us complete and better. It's kind of un-American in a way, this communion celebration because it's more about downward mobility than it is about upward mobility. Here we acknowledge and remember brokenness and weakness, suffering, sin and forgiveness as the places of God and godliness not victory and strength, promotion and achievement. This is how we can legitimately say that EVERYONE is invited to this table, you see, for not everyone is successful and happy and strong and accomplished, but everyone, each one of us, knows brokenness and suffering, struggle and weakness, and so it is that we come together and with contrite and wounded hearts we quietly gather at the table of the wounded presence of God. Shhhhh, just don't tell anyone.